

Strange and Terrible
2 Samuel 21:1-14)
By David Feddes

I've never preached on this passage before, and I probably would not have chosen to preach on it if it weren't there in the Bible plan. It is a strange and terrible passage in many ways. And yet, after having studied and meditated on it, I received great benefit from it, and I hope that you do too.

“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 blood guilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.’ So, the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not 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” (2 Samuel 21:1–2).

Covenants must be kept

Let me give you just a little bit of background on the Gibeonites for those of you who might not remember. The Gibeonites were part of those Canaanite peoples who were supposed to be wiped out in the original taking of the land. God had waited 430 years and waited until these peoples were so bad that he decided it was time for them to be wiped out. And then he sent the people of Israel out of Egypt to take that land. But the Gibeonites had heard what God had done in Egypt and what he was doing. And so, they wanted to find a way somehow to live.

So they came to Joshua wearing their oldest, dirtiest clothes, and with some bread that they left lying around to get moldy for several days. And they said, “We come from a far, far country, but we’d like to make a treaty with you.” They didn’t want to admit that they were right in the land and that they were among the people who were targeted. And so, Joshua said, “Well, sure.” And he got together the leaders of Israel. They made a treaty with these people, who they thought lived at some distance, and they promised to be at peace with them and to get along with them. Well, once they had made that promise, they really couldn’t go back on it.

Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them to let them live. And the leaders of the congregation swore to them. All the leaders, later on, after they found out what was going on, said to the congregation, “We’ve sworn to the Lord, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them. This we will do to them: let them live, lest wrath be upon us because of the oath that we swore to them” (Joshua 9:15, 18–20). So, they became cutters of wood and drawers of water for all the congregation. They became kind of second-class citizens. They were always under a protected status because of the promise and the covenant that had been made with them.

And evidently, Saul had decided on his own that he was going to wipe them out a couple hundred years after this peace treaty had been made. And he didn’t quite succeed, but he killed an awful lot of them. And now this famine has come upon Israel. And David goes to God, asks why, and he finds out it’s because of what Saul did to the Gibeonites.

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?” (2 Samuel 21:3).

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?” 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” (2 Samuel 21:4–6).

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. 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 (2 Samuel 21:7–9).

Merab and Rizpah

I’ll put it on pause real quickly a minute for a word about Rizpah, the mother of two of those, and Merab, the mother of five. Merab almost married David. She was Saul’s oldest daughter. You remember the tale of David and Goliath? King Saul said that anybody who kills Goliath, “I’ll give great riches, and I’ll give him my daughter.” And then afterward Saul said to David, “Here’s my elder daughter Merab. I will give her to you for a wife. Only be valiant for me and fight the Lord’s battles.” And he was hoping David would get killed in one of those battles. But David won the battles, and then when David came back, “At the time when Merab, Saul’s daughter, should have been given to David, she was given to Adriel the Meholathite for a wife” (1 Samuel 18:17, 19). So, here’s a woman who should have been David’s wife, who ends up the mother of five sons by another man, who end up being killed.

Then Rizpah, the other one, is a concubine—kind of a second-class wife—among Saul’s wives. And she had been caught in some tug-of-wars before. After the death of Saul, there was a struggle between Saul’s son Ishbosheth and David for leadership of the kingdom. And Abner was Ishbosheth’s general, as he had been Saul’s general before. And Saul had this concubine, whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. And Ishbosheth said to Abner, “Why have you gone into my father’s concubine?” Then Abner was very angry over the words of Ishbosheth and said, “Am I a dog’s head of Judah? To this day I keep showing steadfast love to the house of Saul your father, yet you charge me today with a fault concerning a woman” (2 Samuel 3:7–8).

Now we don’t know who was at fault or what, but the accusation was made, and Rizpah was the one that the arguing was about. And so, she’s just kind of caught in the middle of this power struggle with Abner and the man who wants to be king, Ishbosheth. And so now again, you’ve got Rizpah caught in a bind where her two sons are killed because of some famine, and their death is supposed to then rescue the land from this famine.

“Then Rizpah, after the sons are killed and hanged, 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” (2 Samuel 21:10).

Now the artist probably got a little too carried away in light of later biblical revelation in depicting this hanging. They may have been hanged on a tree by a rope, or they may have been impaled on poles where they would just stick it up through the middle of the person and leave them dangling in the air. None of them are real appealing pictures. But anyway, one way or another, these men were hanged, and Rizpah is defending their bodies from being eaten by various critters. And the bodies are just rotting there while she is guarding them—and probably for a period of up to five months—camping, guarding the bodies of her two sons and the other five men who were killed.

“When David was told what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, 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. 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. And they buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of Kish, Saul’s father. And they did all that the king commanded. And after that, God responded to the plea for the land” (2 Samuel 21:11–14).

Strange and terrible Scripture

- Cultural oddities and gross cruelties
- Commands to wipe out Canaanite peoples
- Slavery (woodcutters and water carriers)
- Wrathful God lets people starve
- Punishing nation for a dead king’s sins
- Punishing children for father’s sins
- Dreadful deeds by alleged heroes
- Polygamy and mistreatment of women
- Human sacrifice seems to get results

This is one among several strange and terrible scriptures. Just about everything that people find troublesome in the Old Testament is one way or another coming through in this passage. There are some cultural oddities that are very hard for us to understand. And that’s one of the challenges of reading very ancient books, even if they’re inspired books—just the cultural oddness to those of us who come from a very different setting. And then there are just the very obvious gross cruelties and terrible things going on.

One of those was the command to wipe out all the Canaanite peoples. I am not going to try to get into that very much today. It’s just one of those things when you read the Old Testament: wipe them all out—everything that lives in those cities. It makes us shudder. And the Gibeonites were among those who had been targeted for that kind of a wipeout.

Slavery is one of those things that's not very appealing when you read the Bible, and it seemingly goes on and on without a lot of direct contradiction or challenge from the Bible. And so, you have the Gibeonites becoming woodcutters and water carriers—servants. Just one quick note: slavery then and servanthood was quite different from the kinds of slaves that were brought from Africa to be here later on. The slaves at that time were not owned by others. It was more often a matter of paying off debt or being people in a particular class of society. But nonetheless, however you understand it, it's not a very desirable thing.

Then there simply is this wrathful God who lets people starve in a famine year after year after year, where people are starving because God is angry. Punishing a nation for a dead king's sins—somebody who has been dead probably for decades. We don't know exactly when this story happened. It almost certainly happened before some of the events that are described earlier in 2 Samuel because this is part of what you'd call an appendix in 2 Samuel. It just takes various events and various people that weren't part of the main storyline throughout the rest of the book, and it tells these stories as well. But these events probably happened, for instance, before the rebellion of Absalom.

But anyway, you have this problem of a nation suffering because of what its dead king did quite a while ago. Does that thought appeal to you? Punishing children for the sins of a father and grandfather?

The Bible describes dreadful deeds by alleged heroes. We've seen things about David that aren't as appealing as him defeating the enemy giant, Goliath. We see David's polygamy and mistreatment of women. You have Rizpah, and you have women who are part of a group of wives and whose own feelings seem to be ignored in all this.

And it almost sounds like human sacrifice gets the desired result. They kill these guys, and the famine ends. Human sacrifice seems to be effective in this passage, at least at first glance.

These are some of the reasons this passage is hard to like. I'm not going to try to address all of them, but I do want to move through this part of God's Word with you and find out what God is saying. Whenever you find a passage of the Bible that you just can't stand—you say "ugh"—take that passage and think about it especially long. If you don't like something in the Bible, that is where you are finding out that the world is not exactly the way you figured it out to be, and that God is not exactly the way you figured him out to be. When something in Scripture upsets you—maybe a story or maybe a command that you don't like—that's a great opportunity to expand your mind and learn something you didn't already know. It's especially important to take the parts of the Bible you don't like very much and think about them more, not just take your five favorite verses and try to feel warm and fuzzy about them.

Family punishment for sin

The Ten Commandments speaks of God "punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9). That doesn't sound like something we'd like very much. And this story is not the only one where some people in a later generation suffer for what one of their ancestors did.

God told Eli, “All the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men” (1 Samuel 2:33). Eli had presided over wicked priests who were his sons, even though Eli himself still loved the Lord. His line was going to be wiped out because he did not stop his sons from doing such wicked things. When you read about people being punished for the sins of the fathers, very often it’s not just that the dads were bad and the kids were pure as the driven snow but are suffering anyway. Very often, “the generations of those who hate me” aren’t just the ancestors; the later generations hate God as well.

Jeroboam is the king who took over the ten northern tribes later in Israel’s history. He set up golden calves in two different locations for all the people to worship. He led people into very evil practices. God said, “I will bring harm upon the house of Jeroboam and will cut off from Jeroboam every male” (1 Kings 14:10). Now again, it’s not just that Jeroboam was bad. Every king who descended from Jeroboam was bad, bad, bad. So it’s not like God was punishing really good descendants for what rotten Jeroboam did. They followed right in his tracks and were just like him—except for one. There was one child of Jeroboam who died when he was little. When the boy was sick, King Jeroboam had sent to a prophet to find out what would happen to his son, whether he would live or die. The prophet sent back word, “He’s going to die.” Why was he going to die as a child? “He’s the only one in your house that I have any use for” (1 Kings 14:13). God lets the little one die so that he won’t grow up to be another Jeroboam.

Then there’s Ahab and his offspring. God said, “The whole house of Ahab shall perish” (1 Kings 21:21). Ahab and Jezebel were a wicked king and queen. Again, their descendants who perished were not wonderful people. They were horrible; they were generations of those who hated the Lord as their ancestors had hated the Lord and his prophets. The sins and the evils were passed from generation to generation, and so was the punishment.

In the case of the story we’re focusing on, we don’t know for sure what kinds of guys these sons and grandsons of Saul were. Had they participated in the massacres of the Gibeonites themselves? Probably they would have been too young for that. We just don’t know for sure.

But the fact remains that what you do can affect your offspring. That much seems to be clear in Scripture. Don’t overlook that in the Ten Commandments, God promises his love to “thousands of generations of those who love me and keep my commandments,” and punishment to “the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.” There is a difference between the impact of God’s steadfast love and of his wrath. Still, the punishment of the children of those who hate God is there (Exodus 20:5–6; Deuteronomy 5:9–10).

Now, let’s just suppose Saul’s sons and grandsons weren’t that terribly bad. We know they’re fallen sinners like all humans, but let’s just suppose they’re not especially targeted because they’re the worst guys around. It doesn’t seem quite fair that they were killed. Life doesn’t seem quite fair. For most of their lives up until the day of their death, these guys lived with considerable power and luxury. What did they do to earn that? They just landed there because that’s who they happen to be and who their ancestors happened to be—rich and powerful. They were rich and powerful through no virtue of their own. They died a terrible death, maybe for no particular sin of their own. We don’t know. In this life, you end up with stuff that you get from

parents, grandparents, in the line before you—for better, for worse, for riches or for poverty, for life or for death.

We say that's not fair, and we think the only way it could be fair is if each person would receive in this life exactly what they deserve without any impact from anybody else's actions. Well, that sounds good in the abstract, except this would mean that no relationships matter at all. Nobody has responsibility for anything, because you can't actually harm anybody else, and you can't actually benefit from anybody else. In that scenario, we'd all just be little self-contained universes. And now we're beginning to understand why we think the way we do: we want to be our own little self-contained universe who runs everything, and who gets what we want, and protests only when what seems unjust comes our way. Despite our ideas about what's fair, we're connected. We're connected to family, sometimes for enrichment, sometimes for our suffering.

National punishment for sin

This passage also speaks of national punishment for sin. A nation can come under God's judgment. Israel had been in a famine year after year after year. If a nation's leadership does wrong, the whole nation can suffer for it if nothing is done to address the wrongs. It's clear from this passage that if Saul, the head of the nation, ordered and did terrible things, and those things were never addressed, the nation could suffer for it.

Another thing that's pretty clear here is that the people of Israel, God's chosen, are not automatically right in relationship to other peoples. They did wrong in violating their treaty—their promises before God—and killing the Gibeonites (2 Samuel 21:1–2; Joshua 9:15–20).

Some people nowadays think that Israel is automatically right in all of its policies, and the Palestinians are automatically wrong in their policies. No. The measuring stick is always the same. What is justice? What does God's Word command? Now, there are others—too many in our world—who think the Palestinians are always right and the Israelis are always wrong. My point here is simply that it is not automatic—that as long as you're part of one particular nation, whether Israel or America, you're always right and the others are always wrong.

America is not automatically right. In the past and in the present, America has killed and oppressed and mistreated many. America got its foundations in the early 1600s at the expense of native peoples. King James thanked "Almighty God for His great goodness and bounty toward us" for "this wonderful plague among the savages" that was killing millions of Native Americans and clearing the land so that Europeans could move in. In 1623, not long after the founding of Jamestown and of the Plymouth Colony, British officials in Virginia made a treaty with the natives near the Potomac River and proposed a toast symbolizing eternal friendship. The chief, his family, his advisors, and 200 others drank the toast—and dropped dead of poison. These are things that were involved in laying the foundation for the nation. Other events happened too, like the first Thanksgiving—the more positive story that we celebrate in November. But we usually don't remember this story about poisoning natives. But it's part of the pile of skulls that helps to form the foundation of a great nation.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he blasted King George for the slave trade. But then the convention that was dealing with the Declaration removed all of those portions from the Declaration because they wanted to keep their own slaves. Jefferson said of slavery, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; his justice cannot sleep forever.” He tried just about everything he could to get rid of slavery—except freeing the 200 slaves that he himself owned. They still remained slaves until his death and then were passed on in his estate. This again is part of the pile of skulls and the pile of evils that helped to lay the foundation for a nation to be very prosperous and successful.

Abraham Lincoln thought very hard about these things. When he was writing his second inaugural address, Lincoln reflected on the fact that when the Civil War began, he had not been trying to get rid of slavery. He had been trying to stop the spread of it and preserve the Union, but he had not been trying to get rid of slavery. Of course, the other side had been fighting to maintain and spread slavery. Lincoln said, “he Almighty has his own purposes... If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through his appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that he gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to him?” Lincoln understood that both the North and the South were suffering for terrible sins that had been committed.

He said that both sides prayed to the same God, and they both thought that they were completely right. But what if God was dealing with both in judgment? “Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'”

Can you imagine an American politician saying such things today? Can you imagine the outcry that would arise? But Lincoln believed that God judges nations.

So did Amos. In Amos you find this formula: “For three transgressions of such-and-such a nation and for four I will not revoke the punishment.” And then he speaks of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, Judah, and Israel. Amos was preaching to people mainly in Israel. He was from Judah himself, and he went to the ten tribes of Israel to preach. They probably liked how the sermon started, because God was going to blast Damascus, which was quite a ways away. And he was going to punish Gaza, a Philistine city that was closer. And then Tyre—they got it coming to them. Edom—that’s Esau’s people—that’s getting a little closer. Then the message strikes even closer, against the Ammonites and Moab they are our neighbors! And then the prophet says Judah will be judged. And then he addresses Israel. “For three of your crimes, and even for four, I will not revoke the punishment” (Amos 1–2). We might like God’s announcements of judgment on enemies that are some distance away. But when he starts talking to us about his judgment on our own nation--well, the response of the listeners to Amos was, “Get out of here and go back home!”

How about this question? “Does disaster come to a city unless the Lord has done it?” (Amos 3:6). That’s a question that God asks through Amos. Five times God says to Israel, “I punished you with _____ [this problem or that plague or that disaster]. I punished you, yet you did not return to me. Prepare to meet your God, O Israel” (Amos 4:6–12).

God's prophet might have a word or two for other nations in the world today, but I won't circle the globe. I'll just cut to the chase and speak of my own nation.

God bless America?

The world leader in producing and selling pornography—the founder of the Playboy philosophy back in the early days of Hugh Hefner, up to the explosion of porn today—is the United States of America.

The number one purchaser of illegal drugs and hallucinogens and all of that in the world is the United States of America.

The world leader in war and in selling weapons to other nations—selling more than half of all the world's weapons—is the United States.

Countless million abortions of helpless children, with more every day.

The wealthiest nation in the world, living in luxury while many needy people suffer.

Claiming largely to be a Christian nation but worshipping idols and doing just about whatever we please.

God asks through Amos, "Does disaster come to a city unless the Lord has done it? (Amos 3:6) When trouble strikes New York or Washington, or New Orleans is flooded, or droughts hit Texas, or the economy suffers, do these things just happen for no reason? Whenever such things would happen in the past, back when Lincoln was around, people would start praying and wondering, “What in the world is going on here? Are there things we've done that are coming back against us?”

Former President Obama's pastor Jeremiah Wright angered many people because of things he said about America—he attributed the terrible events of 9/11 to America's injustice to the poor. Jerry Falwell blamed 9/11 on abortion and homosexuality. People reacted to Falwell by saying, “These guys over there on the extreme right are crazy.” Or they said, “Jeremiah Wright is a crazy leftist!”

What if the right-wing preacher and the left-wing preacher were both correct? What if America has a broad array of sins, and God is not intent on giving us what we want and making us prosperous all the time? That's a very sobering possibility to consider. It may be strange. It may be terrible. But it may also be true.

What David did

We've talked about family judgment and national judgment. Now, let's get to the details of this story. What did God say? And what didn't he say?

This three-year famine was prolonged and very unusual. It seemed unnatural, so David asked God the reason for it. David understood that it wasn't just some ordinary event. And God told him the reason: Saul's mass murder of the Gibeonites had never been publicly condemned, had never been punished. And after telling David that, God did not tell David what action to take. It was David who made the choice to let the Gibeonites decide on the punishment. So, David had a word from God, but it was only a word about what the problem was. David did not receive a word on what the solution ought to be. He just asked the aggrieved party what they wanted the solution to be.

The Gibeonites were not happy with the way they'd been treated. They were undoubtedly praying to God because later on, David thinks, "We need them to bless us again." He says to them, "What shall I do for you? How shall I make atonement, that you may bless the heritage of the Lord?" (2 Samuel 21:3). They've been praying against Israel, and God has been listening to them.

How many people pray against their oppressors, and God hears? Here's an example from the Psalms—there are many similar prayers: "Pour out your indignation on them, and let your burning anger overtake them... Let them be blotted out of the book of the living" (Psalm 69:24, 28). The Psalms include many such prayers, asking God to smite and smash and do horrible things to people. Those prayers might sound wrong to us. But prayers like that are all some people have. They have no chance to stand up for themselves. They have no power. They can't do anything about those who harm them. So all they can do is cry out to God about these injustices and say, "God, bring on those people what they've been doing to us." Evidently, in some form or another, God heeds those prayers.

Even in the book of Revelation, there are souls crying out under the altar of heaven and saying, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10). These are people who have been murdered for being Christians, and they're praying, "How long, Lord, till you avenge?"

We need to realize that when people throughout the world are wronged, their prayers may be rising up to the Almighty because he's the only one who can do anything about it.

Well, David wanted the Gibeonites to be praying more positive prayers and bless the heritage of Israel again. So he handed over seven of Saul's family to be killed at their request. In doing so, David violated God's law. God himself can punish the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation (Exodus 20:5). But humans are not authorized to say, "Hey, great-grandpa was bad. I'm going to kill so and so." God said, "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" (Deuteronomy 24:16). David did not need God to reveal

that to him individually. You don't kill kids and grandkids for what their ancestors did; God had already said so in his law. David violated that law.

David also violated a vow he had made. After David had spared Saul's life and had not killed him when he had the chance, Saul said, "Swear to me therefore by the Lord that you will not cut off my offspring after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house." And David swore this to Saul (1 Samuel 24:21–22).

But sometimes, when you're in a position of decision and of power, you have to make a hard choice. It's a hard choice when all your people are starving due to a famine. You know you've got to do something, and you've got to do it fast, before more people starve.

But you might also have a few reasons of your own that are a little less than objective. Let's go back to Merab for a moment. She was the one who should have married David. What if Merab had actually become David's wife years earlier and gave birth to five sons by David? Do you think David would have handed over his own five sons to the Gibeonites just because they happened to be Saul's grandsons as well? Let's face it, it was convenient for David to order most of Saul's family to be wiped out except for one who was disabled. If Mephibosheth had not been a son of David's buddy, Jonathan, and if he hadn't been disabled, if he had been a possible heir to the throne, do you think David would have protected him? I don't know.

That's one of the disturbing things about the Bible. We want pure heroes, and David wasn't pure. In this incident, he broke the law of God, he broke his own promise to Saul, and he may have had some hidden motives for doing so.

At any rate, Rizpah is the one who bears the brunt of it. We don't know if Merab was still alive to see her five sons killed or not. But we know that Rizpah was living and was trying—doing the only thing she could—to try to protect the bodies from the birds. And probably people wondered, "What is this crazy old lady doing out there?" A British rabbi says that Rizpah is "every mother who sees her sons killed before their time for reasons of state, be they in time of peace or in war. All that remains for her is to preserve the dignity of their memory and live on to bear witness and call to account the rulers of the world."

Now we read this passage, and it's from a long-ago culture, and it seems very barbaric. On any given year, the President of the United States will send out many young men knowing that some of them will be killed. You may think it's justified; you may think it's not; but the fact is, they are dying for what is considered to be the welfare of the nation. Do not think that we advanced civilized peoples have advanced so far beyond those poor, benighted ancients. More people were killed in the last hundred years by the governments of the world for what was considered their own nation's advancement and wealth than the seven men killed in this story, I will guarantee you that. Twenty million were killed in World War Two alone. In the years since, we have been involved in many wars with nations that did not attack us. Let's be very careful when we say, "Boy, that was an ugly, terrible passage. I'm glad we're not like that anymore." A lot more than seven people have died for what is considered to be the well-being of the United States.

One thing that comes through in this passage is you can't rescue the land by defiling the land. After the seven are killed, you may have thought human sacrifice worked. It didn't. The seven are dead, and the rain is not falling. It says in the book of Deuteronomy, "If a man has committed a crime punishable by death, and he is put to death and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day" (Deuteronomy 21:22–23). They didn't do that, did they? "For a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for inheritance" (Deuteronomy 21:23). This was another violation of God's law, letting those bodies dangle for weeks and months on end while the mother was desperately trying to protect them.

Competing prayers

While all of this was happening, there were competing prayers. Hungry Israelites were praying for God to send rain and provide food and end the famine. David was praying for insight into the cause of the famine. The bereaved and downtrodden Gibeonites, who lost so many people in Saul's massacre years earlier, were praying for God to judge the family and the nation of the king who killed so many of them. And poor, heartbroken Rizpah was praying for God to give her executed sons a decent burial, and remove the curse of hanging on a tree and remove their shame.

Think of what it's like to be a king like David, trying to handle so many competing demands and challenges. And then think for a moment of being God, hearing lots of prayers from lots of different angles, some of those prayers contradictory to each other. It's best that we not try to be God. Still, remember that God is hearing many conflicting prayers.

God heard the Gibeonites' cry for justice against Saul, but he also heard grief-stricken Rizpah. Rain came only after Saul and his family, including these seven men, received lawful burial. Rizpah guarded the bodies "until rain fell upon them from the heavens... 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. (2 Sam 21:10,14). After the bones are buried, and the land is no longer desecrated, God finally responds to the plea for the land.

If God chooses to interact with a bunch of wicked, fallen sinners, it is always going to be messy. That's one reason why the Bible is very messy. Not just because in some ways God might be strange and terrible, but he's dealing with very strange and terrible situations and people who have fallen very, very far from him.

Lord of the lowly

One of the bright spots of this passage is that God is the Lord of the lowly. Why should a powerful king keep an old treaty with a bunch of woodcutters of a different nationality? Who cares? What can they do about it? Who defends their rights? Who avenges them? God does! The king of the nation and a future generation of the king's offspring can go on as though nothing happened. They can enjoy the benefits of wiping out people and seizing what was theirs. But God remembers.

When the American Constitutional Convention legitimated slavery, there were some who saw it as a great compromise that was going to keep the nation together and do something wonderful. But one man said, “I believe we have planted the seeds for civil war.” The notion that you can build a nation when you have millions of people forced to work without being paid, and millions of people who lived here before who perished when new settlers came in, but have no negative consequences from that—well, that may be a stretch.

If some young men have to die for the nation to prosper, who cares about the old woman crying over her sons and trying to guard their dignity? Nations sometimes forget the millions of mothers whose sons came home in body bags, and we don’t realize the extreme price and anguish. But there is somebody who does: God!

We don’t always understand what he’s up to or why he doesn’t take action more quickly or more obviously. But we don’t always like it when he does take direct action either, do we? That can be pretty dangerous. But the one thing the Bible makes very clear: he is Lord of the lowly. And when the lowly cry out to him, he does hear.

All sinned, death reigned, but now grace reigns

Let’s get to the bigger picture. Sin reigns, death reigns, and it’s because of the interconnectedness of humanity. “Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). It’s not just that Adam was a rotten egg and we pure innocent people die anyway because of what bad old Adam did. No. Scripture says, “All sinned, and so death reigned.”

That’s one reason why it’s important to read the rest of the Bible. You find out what the reign of sin looks like when you see seven guys dangling for something they didn’t do, and their bodies rotting and their mother crying. Then you begin to understand what it means that sin reigns and it’s just a mess everywhere. Even those who don’t directly commit the crimes of their nation are living based on advantages that accrued from the crimes that others committed to get them their wealth and their power in the first place. Sin reigned, and death reigned, and there are no innocents.

“And where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:20–21). “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

We need to understand the terror of the reign of death and the reign of sin. Passages such as the one we’ve read today will begin to give us an actual feel for that. A sacrifice seems so unjust. David could have looked for different solutions than ones that broke the law of God. But he did what he did.

There was another man, Caiaphas, who was high priest in a certain year. He said to the people around him, “You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” He did not say this of his

own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:49-52). Caiaphas says, “We’ve got to bump off this Jesus guy, and it’ll be good for the nation.” He had his own evil motives for saying that. In the strange and terrible ways of God, a no-good rat who just wanted to kill somebody for his own convenience and for the good of the nation is speaking as a prophet of God and is explaining the meaning of the death of the Son of God.

And so, when we think about what is strange and terrible, we remember, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Galatians 3:13; Deuteronomy 21:23). It is a terrible story—those bodies hanging while a mother guards them. It’s also a terrible story that the one truly innocent and perfect person who ever lived is hanging there on a tree, with some crying women at the foot of the cross, looking at his dead body. It is an offense. It is foolishness. And it is God’s way.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9) “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (1 Corinthians 1:25).

You may wish God would just come right now and straighten everything out and strike down all who deserve it. He did that once. He straightened everything out by flooding the whole earth and destroying everyone except for eight people. And even after he had only those eight left, he said, “The thoughts of man’s heart are only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5; 8:21). Old Noah went out and got drunk and pronounced a curse on his own grandson. If you want God to intervene and make the whole world less messy and free of evil, there’s a way to do that. But God said, “I am never going to flood the world again.”

Instead, God did this: he sent his own Son to die for us. That is the strange and terrible way of God. You may wonder at some of these stories you read, but this is the strangest and most terrible of them all. And it is the only reason why we live forever.

Like Rizpah long ago, Jesus’ female followers gathered there at the cross and did not want his body dishonored. Neither did Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea. So they removed his body from the cross, and they put it in a grave. Jesus’ disciples said, “We thought he was the hope of Israel” (Luke 24:21). But now he was dead. The reign of sin, the reign of death, seemed triumphant and absolute.

But not quite.

That’s why we gather every Sunday—because on the first day of the week, Jesus rose again. Later on, he said, “Fear not. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One. I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Revelation 1:17–18).

Jesus has the keys that can unlock doors for poor Gibeonites who were massacred by Saul. He has the keys that can unlock the godly, devoted, wicked King David and give him glory forever.

He has the keys that could comfort Rizpah—who can rejoice in his presence today—and can comfort every person who lives through the blood and the horror and the strange and terrible world that we inhabit. Let us face it: sin is within us. Death is around us. It will claim all of us. And yet it will not. Because Jesus said, “He who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:26).

Prayer

We thank you, Lord, for your greatness, for your power, for your justice, for your wisdom, for your mystery, for your love. Lord, we confess that your ways are far beyond us. We can’t even understand the workings of human behavior and human evils. And so, we ask that you will give us again a heart of trust in you when we don’t understand, and a heart of praise when we do understand the glad tidings of the gospel.

Help each of us to put our faith in Jesus Christ crucified, the wisdom and power of God. Help us to live in relationship to the living and risen Lord Jesus Christ, to rejoice in him, to look forward to the day when creation no longer groans under the burden of sin but when it is released and liberated into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

In the middle of this muddled and broken world, Father, bring many more people to you. Help us to be a godly influence for you. Forgive our many failings, and hasten the day when you come again and make all things new. Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly. Amen.

Strange and Terrible

2 Samuel 21:1-14

By David Feddes

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¹Now 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." ²So 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.

Covenants must be kept

Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them... All the leaders said to all the congregation, "We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them. This we will do to them: let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath that we swore to them." ... So they became cutters of wood and drawers of water for all the congregation. (Joshua 9:15-21)

³And 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?" ⁴The 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?"

⁵They 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, ⁶let 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." ⁷But 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.

⁸The 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; ⁹and 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.

Merab: almost married David

"The king will enrich the man who kills Goliath with great riches and will give him his daughter." (1 Sam 17:29) Saul said to David, "Here is my elder daughter Merab. I will give her to you for a wife. Only be valiant for me and fight the LORD's battles." ... But at the time when Merab, Saul's daughter, should have been given to David, she was given to Adriel the Meholathite for a wife. (1 Sam 18:17,19)

Rizpah: caught in crossfire

Saul had a concubine whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. And Ish-bosheth said to Abner, "Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?" Then Abner was very angry over the words of Ish-bosheth and said, "Am I a dog's head of Judah? To this day I keep showing steadfast love to the house of Saul your father, ... yet you charge me today with a fault concerning a woman." (2 Sam 3:7-8)

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.

¹¹When David was told what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, ¹²David 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.

¹³And 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. ¹⁴And 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.

Strange and terrible Scripture

- Cultural oddities and gross cruelties
- Commands to wipe out Canaanite peoples
- Slavery (woodcutters and water carriers)
- Wrathful God lets people starve
- Punishing nation for a dead king's sins
- Punishing children for father's sins
- Dreadful deeds by alleged heroes
- Polygamy and mistreatment of women
- Human sacrifice seems to get results

Family punishment for sin

...punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me. (Ex 20:5)

- **Eli:** All the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men. (1 Sam 2:33)
- **Jeroboam:** I will bring harm upon the house of Jeroboam and will cut off from Jeroboam every male. (1 Kings 14:10)
- **Ahab:** For the whole house of Ahab shall perish. (2 Kings 9:8)

National punishment for sin

- A nation can come under God's judgment.
- If a nation's leadership does wrong, the whole nation may suffer for it if nothing is done to address the wrongs.
- Israelites are not automatically right in relationship to other peoples. They did wrong in killing many Gibeonites.
- America is not automatically right. In the past and the present, America has killed, oppressed, and mistreated many.

King James Version of Thanksgiving

King James thanked "Almighty God for his great goodness and bounty towards us" for "this wonderful plague among the savages."

Feast of eternal friendship

- In 1623 British officials in Virginia made a treaty with natives near the Potomac River and proposed a toast symbolizing eternal friendship.
- The chief, his family, advisors, and two hundred others drank the toast—and dropped dead of poison.

Thomas Jefferson

- Blasted King George for the slave trade
- Said of slavery: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever."
- Tried everything to deal with the problem of slavery—except freeing the 200 slaves that he himself owned.

Abraham Lincoln

The Almighty has his own purposes... If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through his appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that he gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

Prepare to meet your God!

- For three transgressions of _____, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment. *Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammonites, Moab, Judah, Israel.* (Amos 1-2)
- Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it? (Amos 3:6)
- I punished you with _____, yet you did not return to me. (5x) Prepare to meet your God, O Israel! (Amos 4:6-12)

God bless America?

- World leader in selling pornography
- World leader in buying drugs
- World leader in war and selling weapons
- Countless millions of abortions
- Living in luxury while many needy suffer
- Claiming Christianity but worshiping idols
- Does disaster come to a city [New York, Washington DC, New Orleans], unless the Lord has done it? (Amos 3:6)

What God said (and didn't say)

- This three-year famine was prolonged and very unusual. It seemed unnatural, so David asked God the reason for it.
- God told David the reason: Saul's mass murder of Gibeonites had never been publically condemned or punished.
- God did not tell David what action to take. It was David who chose to let the Gibeonites decide on the punishment.

Prayers for punishment

- "What shall I do for you? And how shall I make atonement, that you may bless the heritage of the LORD?" (2 Sam 21:3)
- Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them... Let them be blotted out of the book of the living. (Psalm 69:24,28)
- Souls cry out: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev 6:9-10)

What David did: *Handed over seven of Saul's family to be killed.*

- **Violated God's law:** "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." (Deut 24:16)

- **Violated vow:** Saul said, “Swear to me therefore by the LORD that you will not cut off my offspring after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father’s house.” And David swore this to Saul. (1 Sam 24:21-22)

Hidden motives

Hidden motives can shape “objective” decisions.

- **Someone else’s children:** If Merab had actually become David’s wife years earlier and gave birth to five sons by David, would David have handed his own sons over to the Gibeonites simply because they were Saul’s grandsons?

- **Potential threats:** If Mephibosheth had not been a son of David’s buddy Jonathan, if he had not been disabled, if he had been a possible heir to the throne, would David have protected him?

A British rabbi says that Rizpah is “every mother who sees her sons killed before their time for reasons of state, be they in time of peace or in war. All that remains is for her to preserve the dignity of their memory and live on to bear witness and call to account the rulers of the world.”

Can’t rescue the land by defiling the land

And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance. (Deut 21:22-23)

Competing prayers

- Hungry Israelites were praying for God to send rain, provide food, and end the famine.
- David was praying for insight into the cause of the famine.
- Bereaved, downtrodden Gibeonites were praying for God to judge the family and the nation of the king who killed so many of them.
- Heartbroken Rizpah was praying for God to give her executed sons a decent burial and remove their curse and shame.

Lawful burial

God heard the Gibeonites’ cry for justice against Saul, but he also heard grief-stricken Rizpah. Rain came only after Saul and his family received lawful burial.

Rizpah guarded the bodies “until rain fell upon them from the heavens... 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. (2 Sam 21:10,14)

Lord of the lowly

- Why should a king keep an old treaty with some woodcutters of a different nationality? Who defends their rights or avenges them?
- The nation and a future generation of the king's offspring can go on as though nothing happened, and enjoy the benefits of wiping out people and seizing what was theirs.
- If some young men must die for the nation to prosper, who cares about an old woman crying over her sons and trying to guard their dignity?

All sinned, death reigned, but now grace reigns

Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned... death reigned... where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:12-21)

Sacrifice to save the nation

Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." (John 11:49-52)

Strange and Terrible

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree." (Gal 3:13)

Like Rizpah long ago, Jesus' female followers, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea, wanted to end Jesus' disgrace and bury his body properly.

"Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. (Rev 1:17-18)