

CHAPTER 21

The date of the events of this chapter is uncertain. I incline to think that they happened as they are here placed, after Absalom's and Sheba's rebellion, and towards the latter end of David's reign. That the battles with the Philistines, mentioned here, were long after the Philistines were subdued, appears by comparing ^{<1380>}1 Chronicles 18:1 with 20:4. The numbering of the people was just before the fixing of the place of the temple (as appears ^{<1320>}1 Chronicles 22:1), and that was towards the close of David's life; and, it should seem, the people were numbered just after the three years' famine for the Gibeonites, for that which is threatened as "three" years' famine (^{<1312>}1 Chronicles 21:12) is called "seven" years (^{<1242>}2 Samuel 24:12, 13), three more, with the year current, added to those three. We have here,

I. The Gibeonites avenged,

1. By a famine in the land (v. 1).
2. By the putting of seven of Saul's posterity to death (v. 2-9), care, however, being taken of their dead bodies, and of the bones of Saul (v. 10-14).

II. The giants of the Philistines slain in several battles (v. 15-22).

^{<1201>}2 SAMUEL 21:1-9

THE GIBEONITES AVENGED

Here

I. We are told of the injury which Saul had, long before this, done to the Gibeonites, which we had no account of in the history of his reign, nor should we have heard of it here but that it came now to be reckoned for. The Gibeonites were of the remnant of the Amorites (v. 2), who by a stratagem had made peace with Israel, and had the public faith pledged to them by Joshua for their safety. We had the story Joshua 9, where it was agreed (v. 23) that they should have their lives secured, but be deprived of their lands and liberties, that they and theirs should be tenants in villanage

to Israel. It does not appear that they had broken their part of the covenant, either by denying their service or attempting to recover their lands or liberties; nor was this pretended; but Saul, under colour of zeal for the honour of Israel, that it might not be said that they had any of the natives among them, aimed to root them out, and, in order to that, slew many of them. Thus he would seem wiser than his predecessors the judges, and more zealous for the public interest; and perhaps he designed it for an instance of his royal prerogative and the power which as king he assumed to rescind the former acts of government and to disannul the most solemn leagues. It may be, he designed, by this severity towards the Gibeonites, to atone for his clemency towards the Amalekites. Some conjecture that he sought to cut off the Gibeonites at the same time when he put away the witches (^{<DNB>}1 Samuel 28:3), or perhaps many of them were remarkably pious, and he sought to destroy them when he slew the priests their masters. That which made this an exceedingly sinful sin was that he not only shed innocent blood, but therein violated the solemn oath by which the nation was bound to protect them. See what brought ruin on Saul's house: it was a bloody house.

II. We find the nation of Israel chastised with a sore famine, long after, for this sin of Saul. Observe,

1. Even in the land of Israel, that fruitful land, and in the reign of David, that glorious reign, there was a famine, not extreme (for then notice would sooner have been taken of it and enquiry made into the cause of it), but great drought, and scarcity of provisions, the consequence of it, for three years together. If corn miss one year, commonly the next makes up the deficiency; but, if it miss three years successively, it will be a sore judgment; and the man of wisdom will by it hear God's voice crying to the country to repent of the abuse of plenty.

2. David enquired of God concerning it. Though he was himself a prophet, he must consult the oracle, and know God's mind in his own appointed way. Note, When we are under God's judgments we ought to enquire into the grounds of the controversy. *Lord, show me wherefore thou contendest with me.* It is strange that David did not sooner consult the oracle, not till the third year; but perhaps, till then, he apprehended it not to be an extraordinary judgment for some particular sin. Even good men are often slack and remiss in doing their duty. We continue in ignorance, and under mistake, because we delay to enquire.

3. God was ready in his answer, though David was slow in his enquiries: *It is for Saul*. Note, God's judgments often look a great way back, which obliges us to do so when we are under his rebukes. It is not for us to object against the people's smarting for the sin of their king (perhaps they were aiding and abetting), nor against this generation's suffering for the sin of the last God often *visiteth the sins of the fathers upon the children, and his judgments are a great deep*. He gives not account of any of his matters. Time does not wear out the guilt of sin; nor can we build hopes of impunity upon the delay of judgments. There is no statute of limitation to be pleaded against God's demands. *Nullum tempus occurrit Deo* — *God may punish when he pleases*.

III. We have vengeance taken upon the house of Saul for the turning away of God's wrath from the land, which, at present, smarted for his sin.

1. David, probably by divine direction, referred it to the Gibeonites themselves to prescribe what satisfaction should be given them for the wrong that had been done them, v. 3. They had many years remained silent, had not appealed to David, nor given the kingdom any disturbance with their complaints or demands; and now, at length, God speaks for them (*I heard not, for thou wilt hear*, ^{<1884>}Psalm 38:14, 15); and they are recompensed for their patience with this honour, that they are made judges in their own case, and have a blank given them to write their demands on: *What you shall say, that will I do* (v. 4), that atonement may be made, and that *you may bless the inheritance of the Lord*, v. 3. It is sad for any family or nation to have the prayers of oppressed innocency against them, and therefore the expense of a just restitution is well bestowed for the retrieving of *the blessing of those that were ready to perish*, ^{<1893>}Job 29:13. “My servant Job, whom you have wronged, shall pray for you,” says God, “and then I will be reconciled to you, and not till then.” Those understand not themselves that value not the prayers of the poor and despised.

2. They desired that seven of Saul's posterity might be put to death, and David granted their demand.

(1.) They required no *silver, nor gold*, v. 4. Note, Money is no satisfaction for blood, see ^{<0853>}Numbers 35:31-33. It is the ancient law that blood calls for blood (^{<0006>}Genesis 9:6); and those over-value money and under-value life, that sell the blood of their relations for corruptible things, *such as silver and gold*. The Gibeonites had now a fair opportunity to get a

discharge from their servitude, in compensation for the wrong done them, according to the equity of that law (⁴⁰²¹³Exodus 21:26), *If a man strike out his servant's eye, he shall let him go free for his eye's sake*. But they did not insist on this; though the covenant was broken on the other side, it should not be broken on theirs. They were *Nethinim*, given to God and his people Israel, and they would not seem weary of the service.

(2.) They required no lives but of Saul's family. He had done them the wrong, and therefore his children must pay for it. We sue the heirs for the parents' debts. Men may not extend this principle so far as life, ⁴⁰²⁴⁶Deuteronomy 24:16. *The children in an ordinary course of law, shall never be put to death for the parents*. But this case of the Gibeonites was altogether extraordinary. God had made himself an immediate party to the cause and no doubt put it into the heart of the Gibeonites to make this demand, for he owned what was done (v. 14), and his judgments are not subject to the rules which men's judgments must be subject to. Let parents take heed of sin, especially the sin of cruelty and oppression, for their poor children's sake, who may be smarting for it by the just hand of God when they themselves are in their graves. Guilt and a curse are a bad entail upon a family. It should seem, Saul's posterity trod in his steps, for it is called a *bloody house*; it was the spirit of the family, and therefore they are justly reckoned with for his sin, as well as for their own.

(3.) They would not impose it upon David to do this execution: *Thou shalt not for us kill any man* (v. 4), but we will do it ourselves, *we will hang them up unto the Lord* (v. 6), that if there were any hardship in it, they might bear the blame, and not David or his house. By our old law, if a murderer had judgment given against him upon an appeal, the relations that appealed had the executing of him.

(4.) They did not require this out of malice against Saul or his family (had they been revengeful, they would have moved it themselves long before), but out of love to the people of Israel, whom they saw plagued for the injury done to them: "*We will hang them up unto the Lord* (v. 6), to satisfy his justice, not to gratify any revenge of our own — for the good of the public, not for our own reputation."

(5.) The nomination of the persons they left to David, who took care to secure Mephibosheth for Jonathan's sake, that, while he was avenging the breach of one oath, he might not himself break another (v. 7); but he delivered up two of Saul's sons whom he had by a concubine, and five of

his grandsons, whom his daughter Merab bore to Adriel (^{<0819>}1 Samuel 18:19), but his daughter Michal brought up, v. 8. Now Saul's treachery was punished, in giving Merab to Adriel, when he had promised her to David, with a design to provoke him. "It is a dangerous matter," says bishop Hall upon this, "to offer injury to any of God's faithful ones; if their meekness have easily remitted it, their God will not pass it over without a severe retribution, though it may be long first."

(6.) The place, time, and manner, of their execution, all added to the solemnity of their being sacrificed to divine justice.

[1.] They were hanged up, as anathemas, under a peculiar mark of God's displeasure; for the law had said, *He that is hanged is accursed of God*, ^{<0223>}Deuteronomy 21:23; ^{<0813>}Galatians 3:13. Christ being made a curse for us, and dying to satisfy for our sins and to turn away the wrath of God, became obedient to this ignominious death.

[2.] They were hanged up in Gibeah of Saul (v. 6), to show that it was for his sin that they died. They were hanged, as it were, before their own door, to expiate the guilt of the house of Saul; and thus God accomplished the ruin of that family, for the blood of the priests, and their families, which, doubtless, now came in remembrance before God, and inquisition was made for it, ^{<0912>}Psalms 9:12. Yet the blood of the *Gibeonites* only is mentioned, because that was shed in violation of a sacred oath, which, though sworn long before, though obtained by a wile, and the promise made to Canaanites, yet is thus severely reckoned for. The despising of the oath, and breaking of the covenant, will be recompensed on the head of those who thus profane God's sacred name, ^{<0718>}Ezekiel 17:18, 19. And thus God would show that with him rich and poor meet together. Even royal blood must go to atone for the blood of the Gibeonites, who were but the vassals for the congregation.

[3.] They were put to death *in the days of harvest* (v. 9), *at the beginning of harvest* (v. 10), to show that they were thus sacrificed for the turning away of that wrath of God which had withheld from them their harvest-mercies for some years past, and to obtain his favour in the present harvest. Thus there is no way of appeasing God's anger but by mortifying and crucifying our lusts and corruptions. In vain do we expect mercy from God, unless we do justice upon our sins. Those executions must not be complained of as cruel which have become necessary to the public welfare.

Better that seven of Saul's bloody house be hanged than that all Israel be famished.

~~<210>~~ 2 SAMUEL 21:10-14

THE DEATH OF SAUL'S SONS

Here we have,

I. Saul's sons not only hanged, but hanged in chains, their dead bodies left hanging, and exposed, till the judgment ceased, which their death was to turn away, by the sending of rain upon the land. They died as sacrifices, and thus they were, in a manner, offered up, not consumed all at once by fire, but gradually by the air. They died as anathemas, and by this ignominious usage they were represented as execrable, because iniquity was laid upon them. When our blessed Saviour was made sin for us he was made a curse for us. But how shall we reconcile this with the law which expressly required that those who were hanged should be buried on the same day? ~~<212>~~ Deuteronomy 21:23. One of the Jewish rabbin wishes this passage of story expunged, *that the name of God might be sanctified*, which, he thinks, is dishonoured by his acceptance of that which was a violation of his law: but this was an extraordinary case, and did not fall within that law; nay, the very reason for that law is a reason for this exception. he that is thus left hanged is accursed; therefore ordinary malefactors must not be so abused; but therefore these must, because they were sacrificed, not to the justice of the nation, but for the crime of the nation (no less a crime than the violation of the public faith) and for the deliverance of the nation from no less a judgment than a general famine. Being thus made as the *off-scouring of all things*, they were made a *spectacle to the world* (~~<213>~~ 1 Corinthians 4:9, 13), God appointing, or at least allowing it.

II. Their dead bodies watched by Rizpah, the mother of two of them, v 10. 5:10. It was a great affliction to her, now in her old age, to see her two sons, who, we may suppose, had been a comfort to her, and were likely to be the support of her declining years, cut off in this dreadful manner. None know what sorrows they are reserved for. She may not see them decently interred, but they shall be decently attended. She attempts not to violate

the sentence passed upon them, that they should hang there till God sent rain; she neither steals nor forces away their dead bodies, though the divine law might have been cited to bear her out; but she patiently submits, pitches a tent of sackcloth near the gibbets, where, with her servants and friends, she protects the dead bodies from birds and beasts of prey. Thus,

1. She indulged her grief, as mourners are too apt to do, to no good purpose. When sorrow, in such cases, is in danger of growing excessive, we should rather study how to divert and pacify it than how to humour and gratify it. Why should we thus harden ourselves in sorrow?

2. She testified her love. Thus she let the world know that her sons died, not for any sin of their own, not as stubborn and rebellious sons, *whose eye had despised to obey their mother*; if that had been the case, she would have suffered the *ravens of the valley to pick it out and the young eagles to eat it*, ^{<BRIT>}Proverbs 30:17. But they died for their father's sin and therefore her mind could not be alienated from them by their hard fate. Though there is not remedy, but they must die, yet they shall die pitied and lamented.

III. The solemn interment of their dead bodies, with the bones of Saul and Jonathan, in the burying-place of their family. David was so far from being displeased at what Rizpah had done that he was himself stirred up by it to do honour to the house of Saul, and to these branches of it among the rest; thus it appeared that it was not out of any personal disgust to the family that he delivered them up, and that he had not desired the woeful day, but that he was obliged to do it for the public good.

1. He now bethought himself of removing the bodies of Saul and Jonathan from the place where the men of Jabesh-Gilead had decently, but privately and obscurely, interred them, *under a tree*, ^{<BRIT>}1 Samuel 31:12, 13. Though the shield of Saul was vilely cast away, as if he had not been anointed with oil, yet let not royal dust be lost in the graves of the common people. Humanity obliges us to respect human bodies, especially of the great and good, in consideration both of what they have been and what they are to be.

2. With them he buried the bodies *of those that were hanged*; for, when God's anger was turned away, they were no longer to be looked upon as a curse, v. 13, 14. When *water dropped upon them out of heaven* (v. 10), that is, when God sent rain to water the earth (which perhaps was not

many days after they were hung up), then they were taken down, for then it appeared *that God was entreated for the land*. When justice is done on earth vengeance from heaven ceases. Through Christ, who was hanged on a tree and so made a curse for us, to expiate our guilt (though he was himself guiltless), God is pacified, and is entreated for us: and it is said (~~4133~~ Acts 13:29) that *when they had fulfilled all that was written of him*, in token of the completeness of the sacrifice and of God's acceptance of it, *they took him down from the tree and laid him in a sepulchre*.

~~4115~~ 2 SAMUEL 21:15-22

THE GIANTS SUBDUED

We have here the story of some conflicts with the Philistines, which happened, as it should seem, in the latter end of David's reign. Though he had so subdued them that they could not bring any great numbers into the field, yet as long as they had any giants among them to be their champions, they would never be quiet, but took all occasions to disturb the peace of Israel, to challenge them, or make incursions upon them.

I. David himself was engaged with one of the giants. The Philistines began the war yet again, v. 15. The enemies of God's Israel are restless in their attempts against them. David, though old, desired not a writ of ease from the public service, but he *went down* in person to fight *against the Philistines* (*Senescit, non segnescit — He grows old, but not indolent*), a sign that he fought not for his own glory (at this age he was loaded with glory, and needed no more), but for the good of his kingdom. But in this engagement we find him,

1. In distress and danger. He thought he could bear the fatigues of war as well as he had done formerly; his will was good, and he hoped he could do as at other times. But he found himself deceived; age had cut his hair, and, after a little toil, he *waxed faint*. His body could not keep pace with his mind. The champion of the Philistines was soon aware of his advantage, perceived that David's strength failed him, and, being himself strong and well-armed, *he thought to slay David*; but God was not in his thoughts, and therefore in that very day they all perished. The enemies of God's people are often very strong, very subtle, and very sure of success, like

Isbi-benob, but there is no strength, nor counsel, nor confidence against the Lord.

2. Wonderfully rescued by Abishai, who came seasonably in to his relief, v. 17. Herein we must own Abishai's courage and fidelity to his prince (to save whose life he bravely ventured his own), but much more the good providence of God, which brought him in to David's succour in the moment of his extremity. Such a cause and such a champion, though distressed, shall not be deserted. When *Abishai succoured him*, gave him a cordial, it may be, to relieve his fainting spirits, or appeared as his second, *he* (namely, David, so I understand it) *smote the Philistine and killed him*; for it is said (v. 22) that David had himself a hand in slaying the giants. David fainted, but he did not flee; though his strength failed him, he bravely kept his ground, and then God sent him this help in the time of need, which, though brought him by his junior and inferior, he thankfully accepted, and, with a little recruiting, gained his point, and came off a conqueror. Christ, in his agonies, was strengthened by an angel. In spiritual conflicts, even strong saints sometimes wax faint; then Satan attacks them furiously; but those that stand their ground and resist him shall be relieved, and made more than conquerors.

3. David's servants hereupon resolved that he should never expose himself thus any more. They had easily persuaded him not to fight against Absalom (^{<108B>}2 Samuel 18:3), but against the Philistines he would go, till, having had this narrow escape, it was resolved in council, and confirmed with an oath, that *the light of Israel* (its guide and glory, so David was) should never be put again into such hazard of being blown out. The lives of those who are as valuable to their country as David was ought to be preserved with a double care, both by themselves and others.

II. The rest of the giants fell by the hand of David's servants.

1. Saph was slain by Sibbechai, one of David's worthies, v. 18; ^{<13129>}1 Chronicles 11:29.

2. Another, who was brother to Goliath, was slain by Elhanan, who is mentioned ^{<10234>}2 Samuel 23:24.

3. Another, who was of very unusual bulk, who had more fingers and toes than other people (v. 20), and such an unparalleled insolence that, though he had seen the fall of other giants, yet he defied Israel, was slain by

Jonathan the son of Shimea. Shimea had one son named *Jonadab* (~~1013B~~2 Samuel 13:3), whom I should have taken for the same with this Jonathan, but that the former was noted for subtlety, the latter for bravery. These giants were probably the remains of the sons of Anak, who, though long feared, fell at last. Now observe,

(1.) It is folly for the strong man to *glory in his strength*. David's servants were no bigger nor stronger than other men; yet thus, by divine assistance, they mastered one giant after another. God chooses by the weak things to confound the mighty.

(2.) It is common for those to go down slain to the pit who have been *the terror of the mighty in the land of the living*, ~~4527~~ Ezekiel 32:27.

(3.) The most powerful enemies are often reserved for the last conflict. David began his glory with the conquest of one giant, and here concludes it with the conquest of four. Death is a Christian's last enemy, and a son of Anak; but, through him that triumphed for us, we hope to be more than conquerors at last, even over that enemy.