

## 23. A Promise is a Promise

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The 19th century American educator, Booker T. Washington describes meeting an ex-slave from Virginia in his book "UP FROM SLAVERY": "I found that this man had made a contract with his master, two or three years previous to The Emancipation Proclamation, to the effect that the slave was to be permitted to buy himself, by paying so much per year for his body; and while he was paying for himself, he was to be permitted to labor where and for whom he pleased.

Finding that he could secure better wages in Ohio, he went there. When freedom came, he was still in debt to his master some three hundred dollars. Notwithstanding that the Emancipation Proclamation freed him from any obligation to his master, this black man walked the greater portion of the distance back to where his old master lived in Virginia, and placed the last dollar, with interest, in his hands.

In talking to me about this, the man told me that he knew that he did not have to pay his debt. But that he had given his word to his master, and his word he had never broken. He felt that he could not enjoy his freedom until he had fulfilled his promise."

Tonight, we are going to study the situation that Israel made a promise to a tribe, Gibeonites, 400 years ago, but it was broken by king Saul. Now they are paying the consequences.

### A. AN OLD BROKEN PROMISE

*2 Samuel 21:1-2 Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, "It is because of Saul and his bloodthirsty house, because he killed the Gibeonites." 2 So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; the children of Israel had sworn protection to them, but Saul had sought to kill them in his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah.*

The first and second year of famine David might look upon it as a punishment laid upon them for the sins of the land. But when he saw it continuing the third year also, he thought there was something in it more than ordinary. So he inquired of the Lord as any wise man would do.

This massacre of the Gibeonites isn't recorded in 1 Samuel. Apparently, during his reign, king Saul attacked and killed many of the Gibeonites.

In the days of Joshua, more than 400 years before David's time, Israel swore not to harm the Gibeonites, a neighboring tribe. God expected Israel to keep their promise, though the Gibeonites tricked Israel into making the agreement. Saul's crime was not only in the killing of the Gibeonites because of his misguided zeal but also in breaking this ancient and important oath.

The reason God gives for the famine is rather strange, but in it, there are three lessons for us:

- God expects us to keep our promises.
- Time does not diminish our obligation to promises.
- God's correction may come a long time after the offense but still according to His perfect timeline.

If God has such a high expectation that we keep our promises, we can have great confidence that He will keep His promises with us. There is an emerald rainbow around the throne of God to proclaim His remembrance to His everlasting covenant with His people according to Revelation 4:3.

Saul's zeal for the children of Israel and Judah led him to attempt to exterminate the foreigners from the land of Israel. Righteous zeal can be an act of heroic faith. But when zeal is misdirected, it can have serious consequences, like the previous zeal of the apostle Paul:

*Philippians 3:6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.*

We normally think of such zeal as a good thing. Yet king Saul's misguided zeal was a sin and brought calamity to Israel.

This is a good example of how good intentions don't excuse bad actions. But God looks at both our intentions and our actions.

## **B. MAKING IT RIGHT**

*2 Samuel 21:3-9 Therefore David said to the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? And with what shall I make atonement, that you may bless the inheritance of the Lord?" 4 And the Gibeonites said to him, "We will have no silver or gold from Saul or from his house, nor shall you kill any man in Israel for us." So he said, "Whatever you say, I will do for you." 5 Then they answered the king, "As for the man who consumed us and plotted against us, that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the territories of Israel, 6 let seven men of his descendants be delivered to us, and we will hang them before the Lord in Gibeah of Saul, whom the Lord chose." And the king said, "I will give them." 7 But the king spared Mephibosheth the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, because of the Lord's oath that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul. 8 So the king took Armoni and Mephibosheth, the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul; and the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul, whom she brought up for Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; 9 and he delivered them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the hill before the Lord. So they fell, all seven together, and were put to death in the days of harvest, in the first days, in the beginning of barley harvest.*

In resolving this matter with the Gibeonites, David did not dictate terms to them. He came to them as a servant, not as a king.

The Gibeonites make it clear that they don't want money or direct retribution. Though Saul made a wholesale slaughter of the Gibeonites, they don't ask for the same among Israel. On that day the request of the Gibeonites was considered reasonable. Instead of money or an "eye for an eye" they only ask for justice against Saul through his descendants. David agreed to this.

David chose seven male descendants of Saul to give over to the Gibeonites and they executed them by public hanging. By reading the rest of the story we find that God approved of their execution.

The method of death was also important because it fulfilled the promise of Deuteronomy 21:23:

*Deuteronomy 21:23 his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God.*

These descendants of Saul became an atonement for the curse Saul deserved and so delivered Israel from the guilt of their sin against the Gibeonites.

This promise from Deuteronomy 21:23 explains why Jesus died the way He did:  
*Galatians 3:13 Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree")*

### **C. A MOTHER'S HEART**

*2 Samuel 21:10-14 Now Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until the late rains poured on them from heaven. And she did not allow the birds of the air to rest on them by day nor the beasts of the field by night. 11 And David was told what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done. 12 Then David went and took the bones of Saul, and the bones of Jonathan his son, from the men of Jabesh Gilead who had stolen them from the street of Beth Shan, where the Philistines had hung them up, after the Philistines had struck down Saul in Gilboa. 13 So he brought up the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from there; and they gathered the bones of those who had been hanged. 14 They buried the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son in the country of Benjamin in Zelah, in the tomb of Kish his father. So they performed all that the king commanded. And after that God heeded the prayer for the land.*

Rizpah, the mother of two of the seven delivered for execution, held a vigil over the bodies until the late rains came, from late April to October. The coming of rain showed the famine was over, justice was satisfied, and Israel was delivered.

The bodies of these men were deliberately left unburied as an act of judgment.

### **D. NOT TAKING OUR PROMISES SERIOUSLY**

It seems that more and more people take their words less seriously. When I came to America in 1981, it wasn't very long before I learned that there was such a thing as a 'Gentlemen's handshake.' If I understand it correctly, whatever two men agreed upon and shook hands is as good as signing a contract. It means that these two men will do anything to keep their promise.

However, it is all changed. You all know how many times you have to sign before you purchase a vehicle or a house for that matter. With an endless amount of signing or initializing your name on every single page. We have become very untrusting people. We often think about how untrustworthy others are. How about us? Are we faithful? Are we keeping our promises?

More than 55% of marriages in America go down the drain because they could not and would not keep those simple words "I do."

They come up with some lame excuses to get out of their marriages even though the Word of God teaches them to stay in the marriage with the exception of a few biblical grounds for divorce.

Some of you who have been married all this time would say, "Not us. We keep that promise." OK then, I have something else for you, too. How about keeping time? When you say, "I will be there" or "I will call you at 10 o'clock." Do you show up or call that person at that time? If you are late, isn't that the same as breaking a promise?

When Karen and I were at Calvary Tucson, whenever we had gatherings, there are people who always show up late without an apology as if it is their trademark. So we started to call it 'Calvary Time.' That doesn't fly in our church. We have 'JK's time, which means everything starts on time.

If we are representing our God to this unbelieving dying world, we must show His faithfulness with our faithfulness. I am hoping that we keep our promises as faithful followers of our faithful God.

### **E. TAKING THE LORD'S NAME IN VAIN**

*Exodus 20:7 You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.*

One of the most obvious ways of taking the Lord's name in vain is through profanity. Unfortunately, most of us have heard the Lord's name taken in vain in that sense. It always bothers me because that is my Lord they are speaking of. We might even find ourselves correcting someone, "You shouldn't take the Lord's name in vain," we might say and right we are.

But did you know that profanity isn't the only way to take His name in vain? The phrase, "in vain" is used to describe something empty, idle, insincere, and frivolous. Think about that. To take His name in vain means to use His name in an empty or idle or insincere or frivolous way. As Christians, we often find ourselves tossing up little spiritual clichés such as "God bless you," "Praise the Lord," or "I'll pray for you." There is nothing wrong with these statements, but if we say them, we should mean them. We shouldn't say, "Praise the Lord" or "God bless you" when our hearts are not really in it. When we tell people, "I'll pray for you," then we should pray for them. Otherwise, we are breaking our promise and we shouldn't say these things at all.

*Luke 6:46 But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?*

When we say that He's our Lord, yet we don't do what He tells us to, that is the ultimate way of taking His name in vain. Hypocrisy in the church is far worse than profanity in the street. Let's be careful not to take His name in vain.

### **G. DEFEAT OF THE PHILISTINE GIANTS**

*2 Samuel 21:15-22 When the Philistines were at war again with Israel, David and his servants with him went down and fought against the Philistines; and David grew faint. 16 Then Ishbi-Benob, who was one of the sons of the giant, the weight of whose bronze spear was three hundred shekels, who was bearing a new sword, thought he could kill David. 17 But Abishai the son of Zeruiah came to his aid, and struck the Philistine and killed him. Then the men of David swore to him, saying, "You shall go out no more with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel." 18 Now it happened afterward that there was again a battle with the Philistines at Gob. Then Sibbechai the Hushathite killed Saph, who was one of the sons of the giant. 19 Again there was war at*

*Gob with the Philistines, where Elhanan the son of Jaare-Oregim the Bethlehemite killed the brother of Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam. 20 Yet again there was war at Gath, where there was a man of great stature, who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in number; and he also was born to the giant. 21 So when he defied Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimea, David's brother, killed him. 22 These four were born to the giant in Gath, and fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants.*

David is getting to be an old man, when he goes out to battle he finds he does not have the stamina he used to have. He is easily overcome. That is an unusual experience for David. When David's strength failed, God protected him through the strength of others. God will allow us to be in places where we need the strength of others.

In his advanced age, it was time for David to retire from the battlefield. His season as a warrior had passed. It's time for David to move to Green Valley, AZ.

The giant spoken of in this verse was Goliath. You will recall that when David went out to meet Goliath he took five smooth stones. Some commentators described that because David thought he might miss the first shot, he had some stones in reserve.

However, the explanation is that Goliath had four sons. They were part of the Philistine army. David knew that when he slew the giant the four sons might want to come out and fight him. Although David did not have this experience at that time, of course, the sons would want revenge. If Abishai had not come to David's aid in this his final battle with the Philistines, one of Goliath's sons, Ishbi-benob, would have had his revenge.

## **G. APPLICATIONS**

**1) If we are representing our God to this unbelieving dying world, we must show His faithfulness with our faithfulness.**

I am hoping that we keep our promises as faithful followers of our faithful God.

**2) Our good intentions do not excuse our bad actions. But God looks at both our intentions and our actions.**

**3) There are many reasons for unanswered prayer. When we see our prayers not answered, we should seek God to address the problem.**

**4) When we say that God is our Lord, yet we don't do what He tells us to, that is the ultimate way of taking His name in vain.**