

History and Justice - 2 Samuel 21-24

Date: 16 June 2024, 3rd Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Everlasting Kingdom - 2 Samuel

Texts: 2 Samuel 21-24

This is our final sermon on the books of Samuel. It's been an epic series! I hope you've enjoyed it at least half as much as I have. Today we're looking at the final 4 chapters of 2 Samuel. These are a distinct literary unit that is not part of the rest of the narrative. They recount events from an unspecified time of David's reign. These chapters are carefully crafted to provide a conclusion to Samuel, reflecting on the key themes of the book. One of these themes is that God will one day send his Messiah, his promised king, a descendant of David. Through this Messiah, God's promise to Abraham to bless the world through his descendants will be fulfilled. The promise of the Messiah comes in 2 Samuel 7, and it's one of the most important passages to understand the whole Bible.

The first text we read, 21.1-14, is incredibly confronting for us as modern readers. If this is your first time at church, you may be wondering why on earth are you reading a text like this?! It raises all sorts of questions. It's the same with the final chapter 24. I will have a go at answering those questions, but let me start by saying this is one of those moments where we can only best understand a text by looking at it in relation to its context, in this case these 4 concluding chapters as a whole. So perhaps foolishly, that's what I'm going to attempt to do: First an overview of chapters 21-24, both their literary structure and themes. Then focus on the problematic texts of chapter 21 and 24, and then finish with reflections on our second reading and what true kingship and rule looks like.

1. Literary structure and themes

Chapters 21-24 have a really cool literary structure. You could read them like concentric circles. The outer layer is 2 stories of a king's sin, first Saul's sin, then David's sin, and on both occasions David's intercession on behalf of his people. That's chapter 21.1-14 and chapter 24.

The second layer is two accounts of David's mighty warriors. 21.15-22 recounts the slaying of 4 huge Philistine warriors like Goliath by 4 of David's champions. 23.8-39 recounts the heroic deeds of David's elite soldiers, including naming his bodyguard. The list concludes with Uriah the Hittite. David has been the hero of the story, but actually, he is not the only one of Israel's heroes. He was dependent upon his men, the last of whom he betrayed and murdered.

The third and central layer is 2 poetic meditations from David. First a psalm of praise in chapter 22, and then David's last words in 23.1-7. What's fascinating from a linguistic perspective is that these 2 poems use really old Hebrew, to the point where scholars don't know quite how to translate bits. You can see this even in the English translation of David's last words. Scholars think this goes right back to the 10th century. So these verses may be from David's hand, unedited.

David's song of praise remembers God's grace to him, God's protection of him and his deliverance in battle.

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
 my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
 my shield and the horn of my salvation.¹

The song concludes by recalling God's covenant promise to David and looking forward to a future king.

He gives his king great victories;
 he shows unfailing kindness to his anointed,
 to David and his descendants for ever.²

Samuel begins with Hannah's prayer. David's lament for Saul and Jonathan is the hinge at the centre of the book. These 2 poems conclude the book and pick up key themes from Hannah's prayer that we see played out in the book as a whole.

First, ***God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble***. Second, ***God is at work despite human evil to bring about his purposes***. Third, ***God will raise up his messianic king***.

The first two are explored in the outer layer, the 2 stories of Saul's and David's sin, and the third is explored in David's last words. Let's take each in turn.

2. God is at work despite human evil to bring about his purposes

Chapter 21 and 24 recount to episodes in Israel's life under David. In chapter 21 Israel is afflicted by a famine. David asks God why this is happening. God tells him,

It is on account of Saul and his blood-stained house; it is because he put the Gibeonites to death.

The Gibeonites were a Canaanite tribe who had made a covenant with Israel during the conquest of the land, and were incorporated into the nation. Saul, we discover here, had tried to wipe them out. This covenant breaking and what we might call ethnic cleansing had incurred God's judgement on the land in the form of a famine.

David asks the Gibeonites,

What shall I do for you? How shall I make atonement so that you will bless the LORD's inheritance?'

The reply in the most gruesome fashion:

'As for the man who destroyed us and plotted against us so that we have been decimated and have no place anywhere in Israel, 6 let seven of his male descendants be given to us to be killed and their bodies exposed before the LORD at Gibeah of Saul – the LORD's chosen one.'

David grants their request, and 7 of Saul's male descendants are executed. The text makes it clear that David kept his covenant of friendship with Jonathan, and so spared his son Mephibosheth. We then have the horrific and heartrending scene of Rizpah, the mother of 2 of the slain men, guarding the

¹ 2 Samuel 22.3

² 2 Samuel 22.51

exposed bodies from being eaten by birds and wild animals. In the end David buries their bones, along with the bones of Saul and Jonathan. The scene ends, “After that, God answered prayer on behalf of the land.”

It’s a stomach churning episode that raises all sorts of questions for us. Does God bring natural disaster on nations as punishment for sin? Did God demand human sacrifice? As to the first question, there is a clear line drawn on numerous occasions in the prophets between Israel’s sin and God sending disaster upon them in punishment and to make them repent. This follows the pattern of the curses for breaking the covenant as outlined in Deuteronomy 28. The situation for us however is very different this side of Jesus. The people of God are now the church. No particular nation is God’s chosen people with whom he has a covenant relationship. So while we want to affirm that God is sovereign over the histories of nations and peoples, and the natural world, we cannot draw the straight line between a natural or man-made disaster and the particular sin of a nation or leader.

Having said that, this episode still stands as a warning. In a hard hitting and for us historically fascinating piece of public theology, this is what Presbyterian Minister John Dunmore Lang did in 1838. Lang preached and published a sermon entitled, “National Sins”, in the aftermath of the Myall Creek massacre in NSW where at least 28 Aboriginal people were murdered by white settlers in cold blood. Lang used this text to call for repentance from the European colonists over the blood guilt they had incurred by their treatment of the Aboriginal population. He writes,

Let us ask ourselves seriously and in earnest, whether, as the European colonists of this territory, we can lay our hands upon our hearts and plead not guilty concerning the Gibeonites, I mean the wretched Aboriginal inhabitants of this land. Alas, we are verily guilty concerning these our brethren; not only have we despoiled them of their land, and given them in exchange European vice and European disease in every foul and fatal form, but the blood of hundreds, nay of thousands of their number, who have fallen from time to time in their native forests, when waging unequal warfare with their civilized aggressors, still stains the hands of many of the inhabitants of the land!³

He goes on to say that the Aboriginal people are under God’s protection and that the cry of their wrongs has already entered the Lord Almighty’s ears, and that he, as the avenger of blood, remembers.

Reading this text, I cannot help but think of the current conflict in Gaza between Israel and Hamas. If the Gibeonites demanded the death of 7 of Saul’s family to end that blood feud and bring peace, what would it require today for both sides to put aside their hatred and sue for peace after so many wounds?

³ John Dunmore Lang, ‘National Sins: the cause and precursor of national judgements’, p14, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-33331222/view?partId=nla.obj-33331233#>

But that raises the second question - did God require the lives of Saul's descendants? I think the text does not necessarily draw that conclusion. It was not after their deaths, but after their burial that the text says, "God answered prayer on behalf of the land." And his response was in answer to David's prayer. And yet this text gestures towards the fact that reconciliation between warring parties is a costly and painful thing. I think of Paul's words in Ephesians that it is by the cross that we are not only reconciled to God, but also to each other⁴. Indeed Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross means that no other blood sacrifice is necessary, instead in him we find forgiveness with God and the power to forgive others. Jesus said, "blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God".⁵ I remember hearing the Anglican archbishop of Jerusalem say that this was how the Christian people in the holy land saw themselves and their vocation, to be peacemakers and ministers of reconciliation in a land of deep and ancient conflict.

Chapter 24 is a no less troubling passage. Here the text begins by saying that God was angry with Israel and so he incited David to sin by taking a census of the people. David does so, but then is immediately conscience stricken. He cries out to God,

'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing.'

Things get even more strange. God sends Gad the prophet to tell David he has a choice between 3 punishments. 3 years of famine. 3 months of being pursued by his enemies. And 3 days of plague. David says, 'I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into human hands.'

So God sends a plague and 70,000 Israelites die. When the destroying angel reaches the outskirts of Jerusalem, God says, "Enough! Withdraw your hand!" We then read,

When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the LORD, 'I have sinned; I, the shepherd, have done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall on me and my family.'

David then negotiates with Araunah, the owner of the threshing floor at the spot the plague has stopped, to buy his land and build an altar to sacrifice. Araunah wants to gift his land and oxen to David, but David says, 'No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.' So David buys the land, builds an altar and sacrifices burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. The scene finishes,

Then the LORD answered his prayer on behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped.

Like chapter 21, this episode raises all sorts of questions for us. Why was God angry at Israel? What was so bad about the census? Why would God incite David to sin? How can God hold David

⁴ Ephesians 2.15-16

⁵ Matthew 5.9

responsible for something he made him do?? As to why God was angry, we are not told. The rest of Israel's history records plenty of reasons for God's anger against his people, but here that is not the point, it is merely the setting for what follows. It is the same with the census. There are a variety of views as to what the problem was, but again this is not clear.

The more significant question here is the relationship between God's sovereign rule over individuals and nations and human responsibility. We can appreciate both separately. Of course God must be sovereign. He rules over all! That's part of who he is. Jesus says that not one sparrow falls to the ground outside of God's care.⁶ Of course we are moral agents, responsible for our own decisions and actions and accountable before God. The difficulty comes for us when we consider them together - how is it the case that God is totally sovereign and yet we have real agency? This is not just a question for Christian theology. In philosophy it's the problem between free will and determinism. It's a universal human problem that we can't escape.

For most of the rest of Samuel God has been in the background and the focus has been on the agency of the human actors. David, Saul, Joab, Samuel, all have been painted with rich psychological depth. We've seen David at his best, trusting in God, worshipping him, leading his people. And we've seen David at his worst, indulging in lust, resorting to murder to cover up what he'd done, and the devastating consequences of his sin in his family and nation. And yet, despite all of this, we know that God has been at work throughout the book to fulfil his promise to bring blessing to the world through a descendant of Abraham, a promise that has been focussed on the Messiah, one of David's line who will bring in an eternal kingdom. These chapters sharply express that conviction that God will fulfil his purpose despite human evil. His sovereignty is such that he can even use human evil in spite of itself to accomplish his purposes.

But this episode also highlights what we've seen elsewhere in Samuel, the actions of the king impact the nation. What these two episodes demonstrate is that for Israel the sin of the king did not just have horizontal, political consequences, it also had spiritual consequences, it affected the nation's relationship with God. We are quite some distance from this in a modern secular democracy. And yet we only need to look to the US to see just what effect a morally bankrupt leader can have on a country. Closer to home, I'm acutely conscious of the impact my actions and my spiritual life has on you as the community I lead, the sheep God has entrusted to me, whether I intend it or not!

In both episodes, king David intercedes, offers sacrifices and makes atonement to turn away God's wrath from his people. Perhaps the earliest theological interpretation of this text comes in 1 Chronicles 22. There we read that the place where the angel of death stopped, Araunah's threshing floor, became the site for Solomon's temple. There priests would intercede on behalf of the people, praying that God would forgive their sins. There sacrifices of atonement would be made to turn away God's wrath against the people's sin. And one day David's long awaited heir would come, and he

⁶ Matthew 10.29

would offer himself as the final full and perfect sacrifice of atonement to turn away God's wrath, not just against the sins of Israel, but of the whole world. And our risen King Jesus stands at the Father's right hand interceding for us, such that when we pray, we know that he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins.

3. True kingship

At the heart of these concluding chapters are David's two poems. The outer stories show him turning to God in repentance. So in chapter 22 we see David respond to God's deliverance and forgiveness with worship. David's Last words, in 23.1-7, offer his distilled meditation on the essence of kingship. As such David sets the model for all Israel's kings to follow. This is what he says,

“When one rules over people in righteousness,
when he rules in the fear of God,
4 he is like the light of morning at sunrise
on a cloudless morning,
like the brightness after rain
that brings grass from the earth.”

The essence of earthly rule is to rule with righteousness, that is with justice, and to rule in the fear of God. The result is expressed in the shimmering metaphor of verdant earth on a clear morning after rain. To rule with justice brings sweetness, light and life. And those who rule must do so knowing they will have to give an account before the true king of this world. They know the responsibility and burden it is to govern. We saw this account of the essence of government is in the coronation of King Charles last year. He was handed a sword to administer justice. And given an orb with the words, “remember the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.”

The contrast comes in verse 6:

But evil men (literally sons of worthlessness) are all to be cast aside like thorns,
which are not gathered with the hand.

We've seen what some of these sons of worthlessness are like in Samuel. Men like Eli's sons who offered justice in exchange for sexual favours and stole from people's offerings to God to fatten their bellies. Their god is their appetites and their glory their shame.⁷ Such leaders are thorns that wound, and good only for being thrown in the fire.

1 Samuel was all about seeking for a king. In 2 Samuel God gives the promise of an everlasting kingdom. Here in David's last words we see the heart of all earthly rule - the responsibility to uphold justice. But in these final chapters we also see the need for atonement, to bring peace between the warring hearts of men and to bring peace with the God from whom we so often turn away. Samuel ends with hope that one day such a king will come. Jesus is that king. Only in his atoning death we are reconciled to God and each other. We long for him to come again and establish his everlasting kingdom of justice and peace. But as we wait, we can seek for his justice and walk humbly in the fear of God.

⁷ Philippians 3.19