

2. Great sin but greater Grace

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[0 : 0 0] So, 2 Samuel 21. One of my favourite types of reading is biography. And one of the interesting things when you read a biography is to discover how the author is going to finish it.

Now you might think the obvious place to finish is when the subject of a biography dies. But many biographies don't finish that way. I've got a biography of Churchill, for example, that after taking his long life up to the time of his death, then has a number of chapters which summarise Churchill as a statesman, as a soldier, as a politician, as a writer, and so on.

Similarly, I have one of Shakespeare that, having told the little that is known about the life of Shakespeare, then talks about Shakespeare's theatre, and so on. Kind of general summing up.

Now, 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Samuel, is not a biography of David. Nevertheless, David's story is told in tremendous length here.

And what I want to suggest in these last chapters, chapters 21 to 24, is the author is saying, this is how you must assess David.

[1 : 1 3] These are chapters that give us a kind of summing up of the man he was, what he achieved, what he failed to do, and his faults and his virtues.

David, as I've said, was flawed but faithful. Now, it would be very easy if David's story were simply told without these chapters, to divide it into two parts.

The first part, where he was great, dominated by names like Samuel, his mentor. And when he listened to Samuel, everything went well. Dominated by the name of Jonathan, his great friend, to whom he exemplified on earth what God's covenant was and what it meant.

Above all, perhaps, dominated by the name of Goliath, showing David's great victory. David was good. And then the second part, David messed it up.

When you think of the names that dominate from about 2 Samuel 11, Bathsheba and Uriah, a dark story of betrayal, of deceit, of murder.

[2 : 2 0] A name like Absalom, the much-loved and overindulged son, who broke his father's heart and almost stole his father's throne. But I want to suggest the Spirit of God is telling us in these chapters that that is superficial.

He's telling us to, if we're going to assess David truly, we need to look at his life, at his reign as a whole. That seems to me what's happening in chapters 21 to 24.

But you might still say, so what? This chapter seems pretty thin pickings, doesn't it? Rather like being invited to somebody for what you thought was going to be a slap-out meal and then getting a Chinese takeaway.

This looks like scraggy chicken. It looks very unnourishing. This is not what... I once did a placement with a guy who told me, it won't take you very long to preach through the preachable parts of the Bible, which is probably why he had nothing to say on a Sunday.

I suspect he never preached on this chapter, nor do I imagine he preached on the chapter we were looking at this morning. I want to say this. There is no unpreachable part in the Bible.

[3 : 38] The entire Bible is preachable because the entire Bible is preaching. As Jim Packer said, the Bible is God preaching.

And every part of it, the obvious parts and the less obvious parts, are the Word of God to us. Now we mustn't look at the story of David and say, David was good.

We are David. Let's be like him. Or David was bad. Let's not be like him. This is the story of how God uses a flawed and imperfect human being who is also the Lord's anointed.

There is a uniqueness in David's story. God made a covenant with David and with his descendants. But yet, he's also made a covenant with us. He is the God of the covenant.

We are, as we sang, bonded to Christ by a changeless decree. And that was the point of the various hymns we've been singing. We sang, repeat his mercies.

[4 : 37] We need to do that, don't we? Every day, we need his mercies. We called on the wind of God, that spirit. That spirit of power and of fire who cleanses us, who removes the squalidness and fills the vacuum.

And we sang to the God of the covenant. And we sang of Jesus, priest and victim, in whom that covenant is embodied. This is a story, in other words, of great sin, but of greater grace.

That's my title for this evening. Great sin, but greater grace. Illustrating what Paul says in Romans 5, where sin increased, grace abounded, all the more.

That's what this chapter is about. And the chapter really falls into three movements, three separate little stories, if you like, which are all about the grace of God and the sinfulness of humans.

And the thing I want you to notice particularly about this grace is that it is costly. It was Bonhoeffer, the brave German pastor, who was murdered by Hitler, who talked about the danger of cheap grace.

[5 : 48] This is not cheap grace. So the first little section, verses 1 to 9, I'm going to call costly grace. I'll give you the race set before us, before we get lost in the details.

Costly grace, verses 1 to 9. Then costly love, verses 10 to 14. And thirdly, costly victories, in verses 15 to 22.

So first of all, costly grace. Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years. Notice the skill of the writer for three years, year after year.

Every year they would hope, maybe the harvest will come this year. Maybe the rains will fall. Maybe the crops will grow. But no, year after year, the harvest failed to come.

And here David is tidying up part of the dismal legacy of Saul. Because we are told that the Lord said, verse 1, there is blood guilt on Saul and on his house because he put the Gibeonites to death.

[6 : 55] Now you can read about the Gibeonites in the book of Joshua, in chapter 9. They were people who tricked Israel into granting them immunity from when the land was conquered.

The Gibeonites came dressed in old clothes, worn shoes, and said, we come from a distant country, and we want to make an alliance with you. And Joshua promised that.

And that was a binding promise which Saul broke. You notice what it says, Saul in his zeal for, that's verse 2.

Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah. Remember, not all zeal is a good thing. Zeal, which is an unworthy cause, easily becomes fanaticism.

Easily becomes our determination to do exactly what we want to do. And Saul's zeal here was not good. Zeal can be bad. Favour, the Victorian hymn writer says, we make God's love too narrow by false limits of our own, and we magnify his strictness with a zeal he will not own.

[8 : 08] When we preach a gospel plus, a gospel of legalism and regulations, we are practicing a zeal that the Lord will not own. So this is the situation.

David has to clear up this mess that Saul had left behind him. Saul broke the covenant, and Leviticus and Deuteronomy tell us that the land will be cursed if the covenant is broken.

So you see, this little incident tells us of the terrible consequences of sin. Sin isn't just something that happens and then is forgotten about. Now our age doesn't take to that kindly.

We live in an age when everyone wants to evade responsibility for everything. Isn't that characteristic of our age? People will not accept responsibility.

People will always blame someone else. And that of course is the oldest sin in the book, is it not? The woman you gave to me, she gave me the fruit, and I ate.

[9 : 11] Oh, the serpent deceived me, and I ate. The sin of evading responsibility. And Saul's butchery had polluted the land. Numbers tells us that blood pollutes the land, and that's what Saul had done.

The trouble is, Saul was not just a private individual. Saul was the Lord's anointed, and he stood for the nation. So the whole nation was involved. So the first thing we see here is that sin has consequences that reverberate down the generations.

We saw that this morning, didn't we, in the story of Moab, the story of Ammon, how these nations remained a thorn in the flesh to Israel all through their history. Now God, it's important to remember this, God forgives us our sins.

He is gracious. But the consequences remain. The consequences continue. So sin is abounding in Israel, but you'll notice that grace is abounding as well.

Where is grace in this story? Now the word isn't mentioned, but it's everywhere nonetheless. The grace of God, first of all, in revealing to David the cause of the famine.

[10 : 22] David, we are told, verse 1, sought the face of the Lord. Now, when someone genuinely seeks the face of the Lord, the Lord is always gracious.

These are different from the pagan gods. In the world in which David lived, the pagan gods, there had to be endless rituals, endless questions. And then the answer that was given was more often than not, vague and confused.

Like a horoscope. Something could be twisted to fit anything, or be in any kind of circumstances. Whereas the grace of God here shows David the cause of the famine.

And the grace of God is also shown in David's action. David does not take a vendetta against Saul. Look at verse 7. The king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul's son, Jonathan.

And you can read about that way back in 2 Samuel, chapter 7 and 8. Saul's grandson, Mephibosheth, was lame. He'd been dropped by his nurse when he was a small boy.

[11 : 30] And David took pity on him, brought him into his house, and let him eat at his table. And later on, in his compassion to Rizba. Now, surely this is pointing to something else.

It's pointing to the faithfulness of David's greater son. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. That's what covenant means.

I don't think we always grasp that, do we? It means that not just every sin you have committed up to this moment, but every sin you're ever going to commit in the future, Christ died for you before any of that happened.

He didn't die for you because of our wonderful attractiveness, and because of how tremendous people we are. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

His love is not caused in the first place by our virtue, nor will it be turned away by our weakness and our vulnerability. And behind it all, surely, is the shadow of the cross, the blood of sacrifice.

[12 : 37] There is no place here for cheap grace. The blood of the sacrifice. After all, the temple on sacrifice days would be more like an abattoir than like a peaceful, like a peaceful Gothic cathedral.

It would be a place full of noise, full of blood, full of screams, full of, full of all kinds of sights and sounds like that.

That is what grace means. Grace is costly. And costly grace cost Jesus Christ, the Lord, everything. He came down from heaven.

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, he became poor, that we, through his poverty, might be rich. But that story of costly grace merges into this other little story of costly love.

A very moving little scene. Then Rizpah took sackcloth, verse 10, and spread it for herself on the rock. Now, this is one of the places where you see the skill of the storyteller.

[13 : 44] Whoever wrote 1 and 2 Samuel was, among other things, a tremendously skillful storyteller. The narrative here is powerful. It's gripping. I want you to imagine this.

This woman defending the bodies of these men, including two of her sons, from predators, from vultures, from wolves. Think of the eeriness as the darkness fell.

Think of the loneliness, the cries of animals, the dangers from hostile, perhaps from hostile men, and so on. Think of the stench in the place as the bodies decayed.

It's not a pretty sight. What on earth is this story, saying to us? Well, we can sentimentalize the story. Ralph Davis warns us in his commentary not to do that.

Davis says, you must not sentimentalize this story and say, you too can have a risper-type ministry showing kindness to those who have been the victims of others' cruelty.

[14 : 46] Now, that clearly is not what this story is about. And clearly, that is to trivialize the story. This story goes to the very, very heart of what it means to be human, doesn't it?

It tells us two things, I think. First of all, that human love is magnificent. Here is human love at its most daring, at its most unconditional.

This woman, probably terrified, and yet her love drove her to face vultures, wolves, lions, and all kinds of nameless threats.

We don't know how long this was. It may have lasted many weeks. Some commentators think it would last the whole time of the harvest, which would be something like two months. But you see, human love is so magnificent because it's part of what it means to be in the image of God.

When we were made in the image of God, we were made male and female and given that capacity to love. Love is stronger than death, says the Song of Songs.

[15 : 49] Many waters cannot quench love. This complete selflessness and devotion and so often in tragedy this kind of love shines most brightly.

Very often when there is a tragedy, that's the time when people are at their best, when love is most unconditional. You see, what we're being asked to do here is not to do rispah-type ministries, it's to linger in a graveyard.

The book of Ecclesiastes tells us it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. Now that seems a paradox, so why does the author say that?

He says because the living will lay it to heart. This is where it's all going to end. This is what it's all going to come to. So human love is magnificent, that's the first thing.

And the second thing, human love is not enough. Human love is it may be stronger than death in that it survives and burns after death and yet in this life it's no match for the grim tyrant death, is it?

[17 : 02] Death which so much dominates our lives. We're back once again in the world of Romans 5. Sin came into the world and death by sin.

So death has come upon all for all have sinned. There is a gravestone in an old graveyard in a village on the east coast of Fife and there's an inscription on that which says it all.

Oh Adam, what have you done? And that says it all. The whole tide of human misery, of human grief, of mournings, of funerals, of sorrow, of heartbreak that flew from what Adam did when he sinned.

we know that little phrase, Jesus wept. I believe not just for the death of Lazarus, but for the whole fact of human death, the endless misery that had flowed through human history since Adam's sin.

And these grim actors, sin and death, trod onto the stage of history. I think that's what this little story is inviting us to do. Not inviting us to sentimentalize it, it's a grim story.

[18 : 13] And it's there because it's so real. Death shadows everything. Death challenges everything. And surely it points us to that death which destroys death.

That love which is greater than human love. That love which by dying destroyed death. But that love which disarmed death and opened the kingdom of heaven to all who believe.

Only there can the answer be found. Costly grace. Costly love. And now this curious little series of episodes in verses 15 to 22.

Costly victories. Curious little passage but it's linked to the rest of the chapter I think by the fact that it is also about human sin and God's grace.

And it points forward to the next chapter. If you glance ahead just at 22 verse 1. David spoke to the Lord the words of this song on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul.

[19 : 18] This great song of deliverance which also appears as Psalm 18. We're not sure exactly when it happened. We are told David grew weary. Many people take that to mean he was older but it doesn't necessarily mean that.

It could simply mean that he was exhausted in the heat of the battle. Although verse 17 you shall no longer go out with us suggests that this comes from a maturer period in David's life.

Of course there are problems in this. Look at verse 19. Elhanan the son of Yari Oregim the Bethlehemite struck down Goliath the Gittite. Now I thought that David had killed Goliath and so did you.

What on earth does this mean? Now there's various ways of sorting out the puzzle. there is a parallel to this in 1 Chronicles 20 verse 5 which tells us that it was in fact the brother of Goliath who was killed by this guy Elhanan.

That may be correct or it may simply mean one of the Goliath family was killed and we'll come back to that. But what's the point of this little series of incidents?

[20 : 29] The first point I want to suggest is this that God protects his king. It's another way of saying God keeps his covenant. Look once again at verse 17.

You shall no longer go out with us to battle lest you quench the lamp of Israel. David no private individual but the lamp of Israel the light of God shining and just as later in history the Jews were saved in the time of Esther just as the child Jesus was saved from Herod so here we have another attempt by Satan himself to destroy the line of the Messiah and we have the honorable mention of those who saved him.

Now I'm going to say a bit more about that next week when we look at chapter 23 but it's very important to see that those who were involved were commended as Paul always commends those who stood with him in his ministry.

So God protects his king. That's the first thing. God's covenant is unbreakable. God's king will be protected which means ultimately God's people will be protected.

The covenant is eternal. But secondly God overthrows his enemies. Verse 16 Ishbi Benob one of the descendants of the giant whose spear weighed 300 shekels of bronze.

[21 : 53] Now you may wonder what's the point of all this military hardware here? This great hulking louch like the side of a house bearing down on David. But I think the real point is shown at the end of that verse who was one of the descendants of the giants.

That's repeated again in verse 18 and in verse 20 and in verse 22. The descendants of the giants. This is telling us what's really happening here.

We are back in the world of Genesis 6. The world where warlords try to destroy the whole of God's purpose.

Where human history was demonized. Remember the sons of God into the daughters of men. Remember that figure of Nimrod in Genesis 10. Grim warlords trying to take over the direction of human history.

And scripture makes it very clear that this is not just human. It's demonic. This is the serpent trying to destroy the descendant of the woman.

[23 : 05] Now of course if you had been around then you have been very impressed by their achievements. The cities that they built. The technology that they advanced. Look back at Genesis 4 and see the development of technology, art, music and so on.

All of them good things in themselves. The development of cities. But ultimately giant men simply meant giant sins. Because the devil is at work.

And look particularly at verse 20. There was again war in Gath where there was a man of great stature, six fingers and six toes. Probably this is drawing attention to the fact that in Gath there was a defective gene among the family of Goliath.

Because you see if you interfere with God's created order there are going to be consequences including physical consequences. But the important thing about this giant is not that he was all fingers and toes it's that he was all mouth.

Look at verse 21. He taunted Israel. Now that's something that's well known from earlier on in the David story because that's exactly what Goliath did.

[24 : 13] He taunted David. He mocked David. He said am I a dog you've come out to fight me and here this man taunts and he is silenced.

Now we don't live in a community and in a society in the West where we are persecuted physically but we do live in a society where Christianity is mocked and taunted.

In every newspaper and television programs the intelligentsia sneer and mock at the gospel is words like fundamental is bigot and so on.

Now this chapter is telling us that God's enemies will be silenced whether they're in the world or for that matter in the church. Their words will come to nothing any more than their giant actions.

Contrast that with what we'll see next week in 2 Samuel 23 David says the spirit of the Lord spoke through me. These words will last because they're the words of God.

[25 : 18] Whereas the words of the demonic the boasting the bragging words of these men are silenced.

Indeed they certainly are silenced because they're not exactly household names these guys are they? In fact I'm pretty certain that most of you weren't thinking at all about Ishbi Benob as you came to church this evening.

But nevertheless the point is that these are real people. These are real stories about real people. Now it's not a story that says David was so wonderful.

David was so great that he was able to defeat these giants. David was flawed. We are flawed. It's never possible to serve God perfectly but it is surely possible to serve him acceptably.

That seems to me what the story of David is saying. It's ultimately whether we turn to God when we fall. And that's the huge difference between David and Saul if you study their stories.

[26 : 26] Saul like Cain before him and like many others after him instantly tried to justify himself. Every time the Lord points out what was wrong Saul made excuses.

Saul blamed somebody else. Every time David realized what he had done. He instantly repented and his repentance was as spectacular as the sin had been.

So they're real stories but above all they are stories of the grace of God. If David had known the hymn we are going to sing in a few moments I'm sure he would have sung it lustily.

Let me read you some words from it. Prone to wander Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Take my heart oh take and seal it.

Seal it from your courts above. Like David we are debtors. Like David we only are going to make it because of the great grace of the one whom this hymn calls the fount of every blessing.

[27 : 32] Where sin increased grace abounded even more. Let's pray. Oh to grace how great a debtor.

Father we know that only by grace can we enter only by grace can we stand and we pray that as we go about our daily lives that in the midst of frailty of vulnerability and sinfulness we may grasp hold firmly of your grace but even more so be grasped firmly by that grace which saved us and which will surely bring us home.

And we ask this in the name of the one whose grace led him to give himself for us our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. And so let's sing that hymn then it's number 894 Come O fount of every blessing tune my heart to sing your grace streams of mercy never ceasing call for songs of loudest praise.

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Thank you.

[30 : 12] Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

the God of all grace who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you.

In that confidence we can say to him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.