



## The vigil of Rizpah

The late Stan Thomas\*

**R**ECENTLY WE were deeply impressed by an artist's vivid depiction of the vigil of Rizpah, Saul's concubine. The picture presented her armed with a sickle, keeping guard over the bodies of her sons, while wild beasts prowled in the background and birds of prey hovered overhead waiting for the opportunity to pounce upon the carcasses.

This led us to examine carefully the record of this tragic incident contained in 2 Samuel 21, of which the following is a summary:

David, enquiring of the Lord the reason why three successive years of famine had prevailed throughout the land, was told it was because of the wickedness of Saul and his household, who, in misdirected zeal, had sought to exterminate the Gibeonites, a people with whom Israel had made a covenant of peace. Consulting them to ascertain what would constitute the necessary reparation, they requested that seven men of the seed of Saul should be put to death as an atonement before the Lord. This was done, the five sons of Merab, Saul's daughter, and the two sons of Rizpah, another daughter of Saul, being the sacrificial victims. Rizpah then kept watch over the bodies, driving off the rapacious beasts and birds of prey that would have quickly devoured them.

Hearing of her faithful and loving vigil, David commanded that the remains of the seven should be gathered together, that the bones of Saul and Jonathan should be brought from Jabesh-gilead, and that all be given an honourable burial. The defilement of innocent blood being thus removed, the land was blessed by God and yielded its increase, to the joy and pleasure of David and his people. The record of this peculiar episode contains some practical lessons for us. Furthermore, it presents a remarkable foreshadowing of the perfect atonement which was effected through the sacrifice of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

### Curses for covenant-breaking

The hand of God is apparent throughout the events recorded in 2 Samuel 21, for the famine was a direct visitation for the wickedness of Saul and his house, who had disregarded the law and violated a solemn covenant. Among the curses that would come upon the people for disobedience, God declared through Moses: "thy heaven that is over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron. The LORD shall make the rain of thy land powder and dust: from heaven shall it come down upon thee, until thou be destroyed" (Deut. 28:23,24). The word of the Lord also came to Ezekiel, saying, "Son of man, when the land sinneth against Me by trespassing grievously, then will I stretch out Mine hand upon it, and will break the staff of the bread thereof, and will send famine upon it, and will cut off man and beast from it" (Ezek. 14:13).

The breaking of the covenant with the Gibeonites was a heinous offence in the sight of God, and at the time that it was made the Israelites were fully aware that He would hold them responsible for any breach of it. It is recorded that the congregation murmured against the princes for having made this covenant, but they answered, "We have sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel: now therefore we may not touch them. This we will do to them; we will even let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath which we swear unto them" (Josh. 9:19,20). It is interesting to note that the kingdom was finally overthrown because that ambitious but unwise vassal prince Zedekiah broke the covenant that he had made in the name of the Lord with Nebuchadnezzar his suzerain (Ezek. 17).

The word of prophecy and the evidence of history demonstrate that the nations are respon-

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sible for the conduct of their affairs in the sight of God, but the punishment of a nation for its wickedness may be long delayed, as the wise man declares: "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Eccl. 8:11). What is God's estimation of latter-day Europe, which is littered with the fragments of broken pledges and torn up treaties? We have no doubt that the judgements of God against these nations for their cynical disregard of His laws, and their flagrant repudiation of their moral obligations one toward another, cannot be long delayed, if they are not already operative.

The incident under consideration is an illustration of the delayed judgement of God, for it appears that some forty years elapsed between Saul's sin and the retributive famine that smote the land at the end of David's reign. Likewise Israel filled up the cup of their iniquity in crucifying their Messiah, and acknowledged their responsibility for this sin, saying, "His blood be on us, and on our children" (Mt. 27:25). Again God's judgement was delayed; some forty years later "He sent forth His armies [the Romans], and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city" (22:7).

#### The required reparation

Replying to David's enquiry concerning the required reparation, the Gibeonites said, "We will have no silver nor gold of Saul, nor of his house; neither for us shalt thou kill any man in Israel . . . The man that consumed us, and that devised against us that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the coasts of Israel, let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them up unto the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the LORD [mg.]. And the king said, I will give them" (2 Sam. 21:4-6).

The acceptable atonement could only be effected by the sacrifice of the particular seed, even of the man that had attempted to destroy them. This was in accordance with the Divine law, which is exemplified in the laws concerning the manslayer: "So ye shall not pollute the land . . . for blood it defileth the land: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it. Defile not therefore the land which ye shall inhabit, wherein I dwell: for I the LORD dwell among the children of Israel" (Num. 35:33,34).

This same principle was demonstrated in the sacrifice of Jesus, for he was made of a woman, a

partaker of the nature of Adam, whose sinfulness had banished man from the inheritance of the Lord, and brought death and corruption into the world: "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14,15). Neither silver nor gold could ransom mankind from the dreadful bondage of sin: "ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Pet. 1:18,19). Neither could it remove the defilement of sin from the earth, wherein God, Who is holy, has declared that He will dwell.

#### The seed of Saul slain

When David sought to make reparation for the killing of the Gibeonites, there were no surviving sons of Saul. Three of his sons, Jonathan, Abinadab and Melchishua, were killed with him while fighting the Philistines on Mount Gilboa (1 Sam. 31:2). His remaining son, Ishbosheth, was assassinated by Baanah and Rechab, sons of Rimmon, a Beerothite. Beeroth was one of the Gibeonites' cities (Josh. 9:17), and it was subsequently reckoned as belonging to the tribe of Benjamin. The record of 2 Samuel 4:3 informs us that "the Beerothites fled to Gittaim, and were sojourners there until this day". This flight presumably took place at the time of their persecution at the hands of Saul. It is quite probable that Baanah and Rechab were supporters of the Gibeonites' cause, and that their slaying of Ishbosheth was a practical expression of their sympathy, besides being, as they thought, a means of obtaining the favour of David by ridding him of a rival to the throne.

So David took seven sons of Saul's daughters to hand over to the Gibeonites to be put to death, sparing Mephibosheth because of the covenant that he had made with Mephibosheth's father Jonathan. (Incidentally, David's faithful observance of this covenant presents a favourable contrast to Saul's profane violation of a solemn oath.) Some have suggested that it was a grave injustice that these seven descendants of Saul should have been slain for his sin, but God's answer to David's enquiry concerning the famine, "It is for Saul, and for his bloody house" (21:1), shows

that Saul's household too were guilty and were consequently punished.

From the statement of the Gibeonites to David that they would "hang [the victims] up unto the LORD", and from the statement that they were "hanged . . . before the LORD" (vv. 6,9), we conclude that the sacrificial offering of these seven was a religious ritual sanctioned by Yahweh, the God of Israel, and accepted by Him, as the resultant blessing of the land shows.

This offering was made at a critical time, "in the first days, in the beginning of barley harvest" (v. 9). This was the season of the latter or spring rains, without which there would have been a fourth year of famine. The beginning of the barley harvest was also the time of the feast of Passover, when a sheaf of the first-ripe barley was presented as a wave offering "before the LORD" (Lev. 23:10,11). In accordance with the predetermined counsel and foreknowledge of God, Jesus, the true paschal Lamb, was put to death at the feast of Passover.

Gibeah, where the sacrifice was accomplished, was the place of Saul's royal residence, the home of the covenant-breaker. Prophesying of his approaching sacrifice, Jesus said, "it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem" (Lk. 13:33). It was at the royal city, then inhabited by a generation of covenant-breakers who made God's laws of none effect through their burdensome man-made traditions, that he was offered as a sacrifice to take away the sins of the world.

#### **Rizpah keeps watch**

The atonement completed, Rizpah "took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock [of sacrifice], from the beginning of harvest until water dropped upon them out of heaven, and suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night" (2 Sam. 21:10). On the occasion of the sacrificial ratification of the covenant that God had made with him, Abraham kept guard over the carcasses of the animals and birds he had sacrificed, and drove off the birds of prey that would have devoured the flesh of the sacrifice (Gen. 15). In like manner, Rizpah protected and preserved the flesh of the sacrificial victims.

We have already seen how important it was that the flesh in and through which the atonement was to be effected was the same flesh as that which had sinned, hence it had to be the seed of Saul that was sacrificed. This is a fundamental principle of the atoning sacrifice of Christ,

which can hardly be overemphasised in view of its vital importance. True watchmen of the Lord keep diligent guard over the flesh of the sacrifice, like Abraham and Rizpah. One of the essential functions of those who would be faithful stewards of the mysteries of God is to prevent anyone from either taking away the sacrificial flesh, or substituting any other kind of flesh instead.

The apostles were diligent watchmen in this respect, and repeatedly emphasised in their epistles that the flesh of Christ was the same as that which had sinned, and emphatically repudiated any who would have it otherwise. For example, the Apostle John wrote: "Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist" (1 Jno. 4:2,3); and: "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2 Jno. vv. 10,11).

Subsequent to the apostles' days the watchmen of the Lord relaxed their vigilance, with dire consequences. The "unclean and hateful bird[s]" of an apostate Christendom (Rev. 18:2) swooped upon the flesh of Christ and, in effect, substituted for it an imaginary nature, nullifying the atoning efficacy of his sacrifice by making him the immaculate son of an immaculate mother.

#### **Burying the bones**

When David heard what Rizpah had done he obtained from Jabesh-gilead the bones of Saul and Jonathan, and gathered together the bones of the sacrificial victims. All were given an honourable burial, and after that God was intreated for the land. There is a significant omission in the record of this gathering together. Because of inspired selectivity, there is no mention of the remains of Abinadab and Melchishua, the other two sons of Saul who were slain with him on Mount Gilboa.

Thus, as the result of acceptable atonement having been made, there is a gathering together of three distinct groups of bones whose identities are preserved, and harmony is restored between God and the people. The Spirit through the psalmist, prophesying concerning God's care of the sacrificial body of Jesus, the body which God had prepared, says: "He keepeth all his

bones: not one of them is broken" (Ps. 34:20). This was wonderfully fulfilled at the crucifixion (Jno. 19:31-37). His body was preserved and saw no corruption, and he now sits at the right hand of the Father, awaiting that set time when God will have mercy upon Zion and will richly bless His inheritance.

Saul was beheaded by the Philistines. He, the chosen head of the nation, was now a headless body. Like the nation of Israel, he was chosen of the Lord and had great privileges bestowed upon him, which he neglected and despised. They, like him, had "a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge" (Rom. 10:2). Their sins have for a long time separated them from their Head, the King-Messiah. They are not joined to him, but one day they will acknowledge him, and, confessing their transgressions, will submit to him as their Redeemer and King.

In that dreadful day of Jacob's trouble, Zion will cry aloud with an exceeding bitter cry, "Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost" (Ezek. 37:11). But God in His mercy has a pleasant surprise in store for them, for the dry and lifeless bones of Israel are to be revived and will stand upon their feet, an exceeding great army. Then, declares God through Ezekiel, "ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up out of your graves, and shall put My spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land" (vv. 13,14); and: "the desolate land shall be tilled, whereas it lay desolate in the sight of all that passed by. And they shall say, This land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden . . . I the LORD have spoken it, and I will do it" (36:34-36).

There is another body to be gathered together, even that of which Paul wrote to the believers,

saying, "ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (1 Cor. 12:27). It is composed of those whose whole desire and salvation is the same as that of that faithful God-fearing man Jonathan. He was an ardent believer in the promises that God had made to David, and counted the honours this world could give him as but dross compared with the glory that will be bestowed upon those who are worthy to be co-rulers with David's greater Son in the day of his glory. He is a fit representative of the Israel of God, whose souls are knit in an indissoluble bond of faith and love to the Divine David, and whose affections are centred upon that day when he shall send forth his angels and gather his elect from one end of heaven to the other. Jesus died that Israel might be redeemed, "and not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad" (Jno. 11:52).

May our contemplation of the vigil of Rizpah increase our appreciation of that perfect atonement that has been wrought for us in and through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and encourage us to look forward in joyful anticipation to that time of blessing when God shall "gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him" (Eph. 1:10).

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#### Addendum

The point that Brother Thomas is making is that the headless bones of natural Israel (typified by headless Saul) are scattered. Israel is headless without Christ. The bones of spiritual Israel (typified by Jonathan) are complete because they have their head, even Christ.—*T.P.M.*

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