

This morning, we are finishing up our time in 1 & 2 Samuel looking at the Life of David. 2 Samuel ends with a very strange story, an odd way to end this account of the life of such a great (but flawed) King. Even though this account ends here, David's death is recorded in 1 Chronicles and in 1 Kings. Next week we'll look briefly at that, recap David's life, and give an opportunity for testimonies. For this morning, let's read 2 Samuel 24:

**2 Samuel 24:1-25** - *Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah."* <sup>2</sup> *So the king said to Joab and the army commanders with him, "Go throughout the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba and enroll the fighting men, so that I may know how many there are."* <sup>3</sup> *But Joab replied to the king, "May the LORD your God multiply the troops a hundred times over, and may the eyes of my lord the king see it. But why does my lord the king want to do such a thing?"* <sup>4</sup> *The king's word, however, overruled Joab and the army commanders; so they left the presence of the king to enroll the fighting men of Israel.* <sup>5</sup> *After crossing the Jordan, they camped near Aroer, south of the town in the gorge, and then went through Gad and on to Jazer.* <sup>6</sup> *They went to Gilead and the region of Tahtim Hodshi, and on to Dan Jaan and around toward Sidon.* <sup>7</sup> *Then they went toward the fortress of Tyre and all the towns of the Hivites and Canaanites. Finally, they went on to Beersheba in the Negev of Judah.* <sup>8</sup> *After they had gone through the entire land, they came back to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days.* <sup>9</sup> *Joab reported the number of the fighting men to the king: In Israel there were eight hundred thousand able-bodied men who could handle a sword, and in Judah five hundred thousand.* <sup>10</sup> *David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing."* <sup>11</sup> *Before David got up the next morning, the word of the LORD had come to Gad the prophet, David's seer:* <sup>12</sup> *"Go and tell David, 'This is what the LORD says: I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you.'"* <sup>13</sup> *So Gad went to David and said to him, "Shall there come upon you three years of famine in your land? Or three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you? Or three days of plague in your land? Now then, think it over and decide how I should answer the one who sent me."* <sup>14</sup> *David said to Gad, "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 the hands of men."* <sup>15</sup> *So the LORD sent a plague on Israel from that morning until the end of the time designated, and seventy thousand of the people from Dan to Beersheba died.* <sup>16</sup> *When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the LORD was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, "Enough! Withdraw*

your hand." The angel of the LORD was then at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. <sup>17</sup> When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the LORD, "I am the one who has sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall upon me and my family." <sup>18</sup> On that day Gad went to David and said to him, "Go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." <sup>19</sup> So David went up, as the LORD had commanded through Gad. <sup>20</sup> When Araunah looked and saw the king and his men coming toward him, he went out and bowed down before the king with his face to the ground. <sup>21</sup> Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" "To buy your threshing floor," David answered, "so I can build an altar to the LORD, that the plague on the people may be stopped." <sup>22</sup> Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take whatever pleases him and offer it up. Here are oxen for the burnt offering, and here are threshing sledges and ox yokes for the wood. <sup>23</sup> O king, Araunah gives all this to the king." Araunah also said to him, "May the LORD your God accept you." <sup>24</sup> But the king replied to Araunah, "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 bought the threshing floor and the oxen and paid fifty shekels of silver for them. <sup>25</sup> David built an altar to the LORD there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then the LORD answered prayer in behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped.

There are many churches in the world. I would say there is a real chance that I am the only one preaching on this passage today. My approach tends to be more going through books of the Bible instead of preaching topically, which forces a preacher to deal with difficult passages like this instead of sticking to felt needs preaching and sticking to easier topics.

But we do it this way because we believe this:

**2 Timothy 3:16-17** - All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Yes, even the chapter about the census. The Lord can speak through all of Scripture.

Right away, we need to know what is going on in v.1.

Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah."

This gets even more confusing when you read the parallel account in 1 Chronicles:

***1 Chronicles 21:1-*** *Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.*

Is God Satan? Are they working together? What is going on here?

I was helped by Old Testament scholar Walter Kaiser – *“It is also true, according to the Hebrew thinking, that whatever God permits he commits. By allowing this census-taking, God is viewed as having brought about the act. The Hebrews were not very concerned with determining secondary causes and properly attributing them to the exact cause. Under the divine providence everything ultimately was attributed to him; why not say he did it in the first place?”*

If you’ve had something terrible happen, like the death of a loved one, you may be able to relate. Whether God caused it or allowed it, ultimately it happened and God, who is sovereign over all, allowed it. And so there is a sense probably in which the blame ultimately lies with him, whether he caused it or allowed it, since he could have prevented it.

So what seems to have happened here is that Israel’s sin has reached a point where God needs to bring consequences against them. God allows Satan to tempt David, and David gives in. God did not cause the sin, nor did Satan for that matter – Satan tempted, but David is responsible for committing the sin. Remember that God does not tempt anyone.

***James 1:13-14*** - *When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; <sup>14</sup> but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.*

God does not tempt, but he always gives a way out:

***1 Corinthians 10:13*** - *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

In this case, even after David tells his commander Joab to count the men, Joab asks him why, telling him it's a bad idea. He had a way out. In the end there is certainly a mystery to it all. It calls to mind what Peter said about Jesus' death:

*Acts 2:23 - This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*

So because of Israel's sin, God's anger burns against Israel, and he allows Satan to tempt David and will use David's sin as the manner by which he brings punishment to Israel.

**Four things we learn from this passage.** The first will be an answer to the next question many of you may have:

**Why was it wrong to take a census?**

It is not clear from the passage, but my best guess is that there is something about David's motivation that is sinful.

Let me give some context. Israel did not have a standing army in those days. That was God's intention. When someone attacked, they pulled together the fighting men to defend Israel. They were not going on the offensive to attack unless God directed them. In the 1 Chronicles version of this passage, we find that Israel is at peace at this point, so there is no need for an army. And yet David counts the men who are of age and able to fight. Why would he do that? Not because they are needed for defense or because the Lord has directed him to attack an enemy.

The reason is probably pride and self-reliance. **David is trusting in his numbers.** Instead of trusting in the Lord, David is trusting in the number of soldiers he has. And who knows, once he has an idea of the size of his army, what would stop him from saying, "let's just wipe out this neighboring people who may pose a problem to us in the future, since we have more fighting men than they do." David is beginning to head down a path of pride, self-reliance, and possibly violence. Don't forget, this is the same David who wrote:

*Psalm 20:7 - Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.*

If David would look back at the history of Israel, he would know that God doesn't need numbers in order to win the victory or protect His people. Remember Gideon in Judges 6 when they had to defend their land against the Midianites? God pared the army down from 32,000 fighting men to 300, and then He used them to defeat the Midianites with trumpets and jars and torches. He does not need a standing army in order to win the victory. He only needs the faithfulness of David and His people.

What does this mean for us today?

### 1) Trust in God, not in numbers

Where is your trust today? In what are you placing your hope? From where do you draw your security? In God? Or in numbers? The most obvious parallel today is not fighting men but bank account. I'll tell you where I can be tempted to trust in numbers and not in the Lord. Our finances and attendance numbers. What can happen when I do that? I can compromise faithfulness in order to boost the numbers. After all, the quickest way to grow a church is to become a prosperity gospel church. Or to emphasize felt needs. Or to try to make the worship time more like a concert. Or to stop talking about sin. But the right way to respond to this is to seek the Lord and to ask Him, are there areas where I or we are not being faithful to what you have called us to do? Places where we are out of step with your Word, or with your Spirit? And then to repent and obey.

Where is this true for you? How are you trusting in the numbers? Do you look at your bank account, at your stocks, and find your peace or anxiety there? Do you not know that God has told you:

**Matthew 6:31-33** - *So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. <sup>33</sup> But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

Why do we tithe? Yes, it is to support the work of the church and to free up the pastor to fully devote Himself to the care of the sheep. But on a personal level, it is an act of trust. We are declaring in a very tangible way that our trust is in God, not in our bank account, that we recognize that ultimately our provision comes from Him and not from our hard work or our employer.

It is right to be a good steward of your finances, to save, invest, be wise with your money. It is wrong, however, to put your trust and security in them. Seek to be faithful to God and trust Him.

## 2) Spiritual growth is evident in an increased sensitivity to sin and in becoming quicker to repent

<sup>10</sup> *David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing."*

The last time David said something like this was in 2 Samuel 12:13. The context was that David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband, his mighty man Uriah killed. But in that instance, David did not admit his sin until the prophet Nathan came and told him a story that got past his defenses and woke David up to the terrible thing he had done.

But in this case, David felt conviction apart from any prophetic intervention. He recognizes his sin, repents, and turns back to God, putting Himself in God's hands. And the last sin was for adultery and murder – this was for self-reliance and moving towards power and violence, a much harder sin to be conscious of.

What does this mean for us today? Some of you might think that when you become closer to God, you repent less, because you are becoming more holy and perfect. Not so. Like the Hi Def camera showing the blemishes more clearly, the closer you are to God's light and holiness, the more clearly you see your own sin. And the more quickly you repent, because you know that God is merciful:

**1 John 1:9** - *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

You know God is a forgiving and merciful God, and you know that you desperately need His mercy and His help to fight sin and grow in holiness. Are you finding this to be true?

**Psalm 139:23-24** - *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. <sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

## 3) God is both just and merciful

He is holy – perfect and without sin – and full of grace – not giving us what we deserve. After David confesses, the prophet Gad comes to him with a message from God:

*<sup>13</sup> So Gad went to David and said to him, "Shall there come upon you three years of famine in your land? Or three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you? Or three days of plague in your land? Now then, think it over and decide how I should answer the one who sent me." <sup>14</sup> David said to Gad, "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 the hands of men."*

Despite his confession, there will still be consequences. And David realizes that he wants to fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercy is great. He does not want to fall into the hands of man. He realizes that if there is a famine, their crops will be wiped out and they will have to turn to other countries for help and will be in their hands. And if they have to flee from their enemies, they will also be in the hands of men. Only the plague puts him in the hands of God. God is just, but He is also merciful.

And God sends the plague, but before allowing it to reach its climax, he relents:

*<sup>16</sup> When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the LORD was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, "Enough! Withdraw your hand." The angel of the LORD was then at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.*

God in mercy restrains his wrath. Even in judgment, David prefers to trust the character of God. Remember Psalm 51:1-2:

***Psalm 51:1-2** - Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. <sup>2</sup> Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

What does this mean for us? Only God's hands are merciful hands.

***Lamentations 3:22-23** - Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. <sup>23</sup> They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*

Oh, the daily grace and mercy of the Lord, never treating us as our sins deserve. Would anyone else be so forgiving, so full of love to someone so obviously undeserving? Would any lover, any employer, even any parent? Do not put yourself in anyone else's hands. Put your heart with the Lord.

Lastly:

#### 4) In His mercy, God has provided a substitute for our sins

*<sup>16</sup> When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the LORD was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, "Enough! Withdraw your hand." The angel of the LORD was then at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. <sup>17</sup> When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the LORD, "I am the one who has sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall upon me and my family."*

Let your hand fall upon me. Smite the shepherd and spare the sheep. David is told to go and build an altar to the Lord.

*<sup>18</sup> On that day Gad went to David and said to him, "Go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." <sup>19</sup> So David went up, as the LORD had commanded through Gad.*

*<sup>25</sup> David built an altar to the LORD there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then the LORD answered prayer in behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped.*

He offers the sacrifices on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, and the plague is stopped. Through the sacrifice, God gives mercy. What was it about this scene – the angel of the Lord at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite – that moves the Lord to tears? What is the significance of the threshing floor of Araunah?

Our first clue comes in 2 Chronicles 3:1:

**2 Chronicles 3:1** - *Then Solomon began to build the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David. It was on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, the place provided by David.*

The temple, where the presence of God would meet with the people, where the sacrifices would be offered, would be built there at that threshing floor. And this passage also tells us that this spot was called Mount Moriah? What else happened on Mount Moriah?

**Genesis 22:2** - *Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of **Moriah**. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."*

God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son.

**Genesis 22:9-14** - *When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. <sup>12</sup> "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." <sup>13</sup> Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup> So Abraham called that place *The LORD Will Provide*. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."*

On that mountain, God relents, shows mercy, and provides a substitute. And now in David's day, on that same mountain, God relents, shows mercy, and after David offers himself as a substitute, God declines and tells him to offer a sacrifice as a substitute instead. But we know that the sacrifice of animals can not do away with sins.

**Hebrews 10:4** - *it is impossible for the **blood of bulls** and goats to take away sins.*

Instead, they point us to a greater sacrifice.

**Hebrews 10:11-12** - *Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. <sup>12</sup> But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.*

What is the significance of the threshing floor or Araunah? Why does the Lord weep there as he sees the angel about to strike down Jerusalem? Why does he

provide a substitute who will atone for David's sin? It all points to Jesus and the cross, the place where justice and mercy meet perfectly.

**Matthew 26:31** - *Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."*

I know there are still some of you who feel that this whole thing is unfair. But the Bible declares that we all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, and we all deserve death. But in Jesus we have been shown mercy and given eternal life. He took the rod of justice, the punishment we deserved, and we have received forgiveness of sins, adoption as children of God, the Holy Spirit inside of us, eternal life.

God is just – there are consequences for sins. But He is merciful – Jesus had taken the ultimate punishment that we deserved. Why can we trust in Him and not numbers? Why is it better to put ourselves in the hands of the Lord? Because only His hands bear the nail scars that show His commitment to us, His love for us. He has given us His Son, and He will give us everything we need.

**Romans 8:31-32** - *What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

Put your trust in Him this morning.