



Let us delight in the words of our God as he speaks to us in 2 Samuel 24 (page 258). Ruthie and I enjoyed our time away, but it's a blessing to be back with you. We were here last Sunday, and it was nice to participate in worship with no platform responsibilities. I was especially glad for that when Pastor Mike began reading through the list of David's mighty men in 2 Samuel 23. He was so wiped out from practicing the pronunciation of their names, that he took a week's vacation to recover.

In chapter 23 we're introduced to David's mighty men. In chapter 24, we're faced with a major problem. The chapter begins with this disturbing statement: "Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel..." (v. 1). To my knowledge only one thing kindles God's anger, according to Scripture, and that's sin. The word "again" indicates that this was not the first time the people of Israel had kindled God's anger, and it wouldn't be the last. Five centuries after David's lifetime, the prophet Daniel confessed to the Lord on behalf of the people, "we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws" (Dan. 9:5 NIV). Decades after Daniel's lifetime, Ezra fell on his knees and prayed, "I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors until now, our guilt has been great" (Ezra 9:6-7a NIV).

We're not sure what sin the people committed on this occasion. The narrator could be referring to their recent sin of supporting Absalom's conspiracy against God's anointed king, David. Whatever the case, God used David and a sinful act that he would commit, to unleash the Lord's discipline on the nation as a whole.

The Sinful Act (vv. 1-9)

¹ Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah." ² So the king said to Joab, the commander of the army, who was with him, "Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people." ³ But Joab said to the king, "May the Lord your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see it, but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?" ⁴ But the king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to number the people of Israel. ⁵ They crossed the Jordan and began from Aroer, and from the city that is in the middle of the valley, toward Gad and on to Jazer. ⁶ Then they came to Gilead, and to Kadesh in the land of the Hittites; and they came to Dan, and from Dan they went around to Sidon, ⁷ and came to the fortress of Tyre and to all the cities

of the Hivites and Canaanites; and they went out to the Negeb of Judah at Beersheba. ⁸ So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. ⁹ And Joab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to the king: in Israel there were 800,000 valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were 500,000.

- 2 Samuel 24:1-9

This is a perplexing passage in light of a couple of nagging questions it raises: (1) *Who prompted David to sin?* (2) *What was the precise nature of his sin?* We know that taking this census was a sin, for in verse 10 David confesses to the Lord, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done." We'll talk more about his confession in a moment. But first, let us consider the two questions before us.

The first question, *who prompted David to sin?*, requires a carefully nuanced answer. Second Samuel 24:1 says, "[the Lord] incited David," whereas the parallel account in 1 Chronicles 21:1 says, "Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel" (NIV). The way to reconcile these two accounts is to consider the teaching of Scripture as a whole. The Reformer Martin Luther rightly emphasized, according to Scripture, that *the devil is God's devil*. Since God is sovereign, everything happens according to his plan.¹ David ordered that a census be taken because God determined that David would do so. But Satan was used as the secondary cause to incite David. God ordained David's sin but is not to be blamed for tempting him, for Scripture says, "God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one" (James 1:13). It is therefore appropriate to say that God was sovereign over David's sin, Satan solicited David to sin, and David was responsible for his sin. For Scripture also says that "each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (James 1:14).

This takes us to the second question, *What was the precise nature of David's sin?* The text does not explicitly tell us. Census-taking itself is not a sin, for God had Moses take a census at the beginning and end of Israel's forty years' wandering in the wilderness (Num. 1:2-3; 26:2). The second census revealed that the total of Israel's armed forces was less than it had been forty years earlier, after their exodus from Egypt. Yet God would use these smaller forces to conquer the land that God had promised his people, for the battle was the Lord's. They would conquer the land not in their strength, but his.

But this census that David undertook seemed to serve no other purpose "than to inflate the national ego."² The census seems to have been motivated by pride on David's part, as indicated by Joab's response when David told him to number the people. "But Joab said to the king, 'May the LORD your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see it, *but why does my lord the king*

¹ While discussing the connection between 1 Chronicles 21:1 and 2 Samuel 24:1, Walter Kaiser points out that, according to the Hebrew way of thinking, "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?" Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 131.

² Gleason Archer, Jr., *New International Ecyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. Cited in "2 Samuel Commentary," Precept Austin [online]. Retrieved on 08 August 2023 from <https://www.preceptaustin.org/2-samuel-24-commentary>.

delight in this thing?” (2 Sam. 24:3, emphasis mine). If you know anything about Joab, you know that he was not characterized by a sensitive conscience. But even he knew that this census was a bad idea. It was not only senseless, but sinful. “But the king’s word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army” (v. 24a). This shows that Joab was not the only one protesting. The other commanders did as well. But David disregarded their objections and insisted that the census be taken.

Aren’t we often guilty of the same thing in our own way? We’re bent on doing something, *delighting* in something, that we know is wrong. And when God mercifully puts people in our path to dissuade us from doing such a thing, we go ahead and do it anyway.

So, Joab and his men canvassed the country, and after nearly ten months, the census was complete. All in all, there were 1.3 million fighting men – an impressive number. To put it in perspective, the United States currently has the world’s third largest army, with 1.4 million active military personnel. David knew he had a strong regular army plus a ready militia, and he wanted to boast actual numbers. At least that’s what the text seems to imply by the fact that King David *delighted* in taking such a census.

Aren’t we often guilty of doing the same thing in the kingdom of our own lives? We take a census of our bank accounts, our academic credentials, our athletic achievements and other accomplishments. We can even take a census of our service for the Lord, like how many ministries we have been involved in, how much money we give to the church, how long we’ve been serving the Lord – and it becomes a source of boasting for us.

Whether we’re boasting about our past accomplishments or present circumstances or even our future plans, James says, “all such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (James 1:16-17). David’s act of taking a census “reflect[ed] a shift in David’s object of faith – a shift from reliance on [the Lord] to win battles to a reliance on ... military might (2 Sam. 24:3).”³ Scripture says, “Whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). At the root of every sin is a failure to trust God.

David sinned and he knew it, as indicated by what happens next. His *sinful act* is followed by a *sincere confession*.

The Sincere Confession (v. 10)

But David's heart struck him after he had numbered the people. And David said to the Lord, “I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, please take away the iniquity of your servant, for I have done very foolishly.”

- 2 Samuel 24:10

As soon as David heard the count, he was crushed to the core. His inward conviction led to an immediate confession. David’s confession here is almost identical to the one he made after committing adultery with Bathsheba and killing her husband Uriah. But

³ Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*. The NIV Application Commentary, gen. ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2003), 643-644.

this time there is no attempt to conceal his sin. And this time David confesses his sin *before* he is approached by the Lord's prophet, not afterwards. David had learned the lesson that his son Solomon would later articulate. It is recorded in Proverbs 28:13, which says, "Whoever conceals his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will find mercy." This immediate, heartfelt confession from David shows that while he is still far from perfect, he's making spiritual progress. "He repents without prophetic prodding."⁴

What about you? Over the course of time are you becoming a quicker confessor? When your heart strikes you with conviction, do you go to God immediately to make it right – even before someone else finds out and confronts you about it? That's a mark of spiritual growth and maturity.

***Sin is costly, but because of God's mercy
we can be forgiven and enjoy fellowship with him.***

This truth is demonstrated throughout the remainder of the chapter. The consequence of David's sin – and whatever sin Israel committed that kindled God's anger – is severe, but David receives forgiveness and enjoys renewed fellowship with the Lord.

The Severe Consequences (vv. 11-17)

¹¹ And when David arose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, ¹² "Go and say to David, 'Thus says the Lord, Three things I offer you. Choose one of them, that I may do it to you.'" ¹³ So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, "Shall three years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me."¹⁴ Then David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man."

- 2 Samuel 24:11-14

The Lord makes David "pick his poison." He must choose between three years of famine, three months of running from his enemies, or three days of a plague across the land. David agonized over this dreadful decision. All three options were terrible. In the midst of his confused distress, David doesn't know which option to choose. But he does know that "the only hope for anyone against whom the Lord's anger has been kindled is the mercy of the Lord."⁵ So, David says, "Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man" (v. 14). Dale Davis writes,

David is about to meet Yahweh's wrath and yet is convinced of Yahweh's mercies. Somehow he imagines that the hand that strikes him will never-theless spare him.

⁴ Ibid., 645.

⁵ John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel: Your Kingdom Come. Preaching the Word*, edited by R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 544-545.

... See how well he knows his God! In his crises his theology seems to come out almost by reflex action. Is this not as it should be...? Must you not have your best theology for your darkest moments? And in the disasters and sins of life is there a kinder place to fall than “into the hand of [the LORD]”?⁶

I spent most of my childhood years growing up outside of Chicago and made numerous visits to Brookfield Zoo. About a decade after I left, an incident occurred there that made world news. A three-year-old boy slipped away from his mother, climbed through a barrier and fell eighteen feet into an enclosure inhabited by seven gorillas. How did he get out of this horrible predicament? One of the gorillas, Binti Jua, picked up the boy, cradled him in her arms, and put him down near a door where zoo keepers could get him. The boy suffered a broken hand and cuts to his face but wound up being okay.⁷ People were amazed by the story because we don't associate gorillas with kindness. As one writer put it, “We may be grateful to Binti but would prefer not to trust her with another child.”⁸

Likewise, we sometimes see God's mercies as a divine exception rather than a daily expression of God's goodness (see Lamentations 3:22-23). Even as he was about to undergo God's judgment, “David knew he was not facing a gorilla-God.”⁹ David was a believer that had a grip on God's mercy. Or, rather, God's mercy had a grip on David. In verses 15-17 we see that God's judgment, though severe, was moderated by his mercy.

¹⁵ So the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning until the appointed time. And there died of the people from Dan to Beersheba 70,000 men.¹⁶ And when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented from the calamity and said to the angel who was working destruction among the people, “It is enough; now stay your hand.” And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. ¹⁷ Then David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel who was striking the people, and said, “Behold, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father's house.”

- 2 Samuel 24:15-17

In commenting on these verses, John Woodhouse issues a wise caution, saying,

Before we object to this severe punishment, remember that we do not know what offense had kindled the Lord's anger. We are therefore hardly in a position to judge the punishment as excessive. Indeed the severity of the punishment tells us that the offense must have been great in the Lord's eyes.¹⁰

But as the angel was about to strike Jerusalem, the Lord said, “Enough! Stay your hand!” The wrath of God was stayed, but it was not satisfied. Something had to be done to satisfy

⁶ Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1999, reprinted 2018), 320.

⁷ To see media coverage and video footage of Binti and the boy, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puFCuMac0Vk>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 321.

¹⁰ Woodhouse, 545.

God's righteous anger if his judgment was to be removed altogether. In a moving gesture, David expresses his willingness to lay down his life for the Lord's people, for his sheep. But "David's great problem was that he as guilty as his people. He knew that (vv. 10, 17). He was *willing* to die for his sheep (v. 17), but could not." Another provision had to be made.¹¹

The Sacrificial Offerings (vv. 18-25)

¹⁸ And Gad came that day to David and said to him, "Go up, raise an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." ¹⁹ So David went up at Gad's word, as the Lord commanded. ²⁰ And when Araunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. And Araunah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground.²¹ And Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" David said, "To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the Lord, that the plague may be averted from the people." ²² Then Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him. Here are the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. ²³ All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king." And Araunah said to the king, "May the Lord your God accept you."²⁴ But the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. ²⁵ And David built there an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the Lord responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.

- 2 Samuel 24:18-25

This is the last act of David recorded in the books of Samuel – the offering of sacrifices. "Burnt offerings" were the most common of the Old Testament sacrifices (see Leviticus 1). Their main purpose was to atone for human sin by propitiating God's wrath.¹² You could say a burnt offering *satisfied* God's wrath, or *appeased* God's wrath, but the word *propitiate* captures the full essence of the sacrifice's effect. Theologian Wayne Grudem defines *propitiation* as "a sacrifice that bears God's wrath to the end and in so doing changes God's wrath toward us into favor."

This is why David offered not only burnt offerings but also peace offerings. "Peace offerings" (see Lev. 3) were a celebration of peace with God and all that flows from that blessing.¹³ What David did at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite was of historic importance. The parallel account in 1 Chronicles says that when David saw that the Lord answered him and received his sacrifices there at the threshing floor, "then David said, 'Here shall be the house of the LORD God and here the altar of burnt offering for Israel'" (1 Chron. 22:1).

¹¹ Ibid., 549.

¹² Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 63. Cited by Woodhouse, 549.

¹³ Ibid.

In due time David's son Solomon built the temple at this place, where burnt offerings would be repeatedly offered for the ongoing sins of Israel for a long time to come¹⁴ – until Jesus, the Good Shepherd, David's greater Son – the one to whom all these sacrifices pointed – gave his life for the sheep. That's why the author of Hebrews states,

But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written about me in the Scriptures.'"

- Hebrews 10:4-7

"A short distance from the threshing floor of Araunah the perfect and complete sacrifice for the sins of the world was made when Jesus died on the cross."¹⁵ Three days later he rose victoriously from the grave, proving that he had conquered sin and death for all who trust in him. For this reason the apostle Paul confidently declared in Romans 3:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for he was looking ahead and including them in what he would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate his righteousness, so as to be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

- Romans 3:23-27 ESV, NLT

This is good news! It was good news for David. It was good news for Paul. It is good news for me and for you.

***Sin is costly, but because of God's mercy
we can be forgiven and enjoy fellowship with him.***

Have you, like David, confessed your sins and entrusted yourself to God, knowing that his mercy is great? If you have not yet done so, will you repent and trust in Christ today?

If you are already a Christian, are you living your life for the one who loved you and gave himself for you? In Romans 12, Paul writes to believers, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship" (CSB). David said, "I will not offer ... to the Lord my God that [which] costs me nothing." What is your commitment to Christ costing you?

¹⁴ Woodhouse 549.

¹⁵ Ibid., 550.