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# The King's Sin and Sacrifice

## 2 Samuel 24<sup>25</sup>

*Russ Kennedy*

Stories with surprising endings...

Stories with endings that tell us more is coming...

This story which has both a surprising and an evocative ending...

This is an interesting and difficult opening.

The Lord is angry Israel

The Lord incites David to do a census

This census leads to judgment

As surprising as it may be in many levels, here is the final chapter of the record of David's kingship as recorded in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel.

### **The Command (24:1-4)**

#### ***The Problem (24:1-2)***

David commands that a census be taken of all the tribes of Israel.

<sup>1</sup> Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah." <sup>2</sup> 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 Beer-sheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people."

The story opens with the ultimate mover behind it. God is angry with Israel. And it seems, David has come under the censure of the Lord as well. So Israel is sinning in some way that brings God's anger. God has purposed to deal with their sin. 2 Samuel seems to indicate that the Lord Himself put the desire to number the people into David's heart. The Chronicler also tells us that 'Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel' (1 Chronicles 21:1). And then it is David who actually commits the sin. The author of 2 Samuel has often pointed us to how the Lord purposed and planned things in David's life. The author of Chronicles points us to the provocations and temptations that led to the sins by Israel's leaders. But ultimately, it David who is responsible for the pride and arrogance of his heart that led him to do this.

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This puts in perspective the historian's ascription in 2 Samuel of the inciting of David to the Lord and indicates that the Lord adapted the efforts of Satan to further his own purposes for his people. While God is not the author of the sin, He planned to permit that sin to happen.

The Lord's role confirms this general picture. He did not want such a census. If anything is clear, it is that there was a deepening problem of national backsliding which the Lord intended to correct. This was presumably some kind of nationalistic pride which robbed the Lord of his glory as the God of Israel. That David shared in this proud and self-sufficient attitude is clear from his overruling the advice of Joab (24:3).

David summons Joab, the commander of Israel's military, and orders him to take a census. Now from Joab's reaction and the fact that only the males who could draw a sword (v. 9) were counted, this is a draft census. David wants to know the potential strength of his army. The ordering of a general or military census was not allowed unless the Lord specifically ordered it. According to Exodus 30:11-16, that a head tax of a half-shekel was required at any census. If that was done, then plague would not come upon the people.

### ***The Protest (24:3-4)***

Joab unsuccessfully attempts to change David's mind about taking a census.

<sup>3</sup> 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?" <sup>4</sup> But the king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army.

Joab makes an appeal for David not to do this. He begins by addressing the motivation that is driving David. David is concerned that his army is large enough to carry out the defense of the nation and the expansion of Israel's territories. Joab's prayer-wish should cause David to place his reliance in the Lord's providences and provision.

Joab also seems to see beyond David's concerns to David's pride. David's heart has delighted to do this. So David seems to delight in the power and prowess of his army. He wants to know not only how many active enlisted men he has, but also what is the potential size of his force. Phrased as question, Joab is trying to get David to face his own pride.

Remember, the Lord's purpose and plans are behind all this. God is intent on punishing Israel. And now we find out that the military command staff were against it as well. So, David's command prevails over Joab's appeal and the commander's opposition.

### **The Census (24:5-9)**

The execution of the counting takes place...

<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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, <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. <sup>9</sup> 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.

### ***Its Place (24:5-7)***

The itinerary of the census takers is given. They travel throughout the land of Israel. It is through this narrative that we learn of the extent of David's kingdom. All throughout the land the counters go.

### ***Its Process (24:8)***

It takes nine months and 20 days to complete the census. This is a very long time. But it is a large area. All the cities, towns and villages have to be visited. All the farms had to be called on. After traveling through the land for all this time the census takers return to Jerusalem.

### ***Its Product (24:9)***

With the census complete the numbers are recorded. There are 500,000 men of military age in Judah and 800,000 throughout the rest of Israel. Is there something being made of the 800,000 valiant men? Are the men of Judah not as courageous as the men of Israel? Probably not. But it does mean that David could field an army of 1.3 million fighting men.

Using numbers to measure God's blessing or to field the Lord's army has been a constant desire down through the ages. The church, particularly in the last 200 years, has been particularly afflicted with numbers and noses.

## **The Conviction (24:10)**

<sup>10</sup> 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."

After the census is taken, David realizes he sinned and asks for the Lord's forgiveness.

### ***The Guilt***

David's heart is convicted of his sin. It is interesting that it is after the census is complete. For nine months and 20 days David has presided over this adventure. But when he receives the report, his conscience is stricken and he knows he is guilty.

We know from the rest of the Bible that guilt is a grace from the Lord. We usually view guilt as an enemy. IT is something to be denied, ignored, minimized or deadened. But guilt over sin is a great gift from God. It is a grace. IT is dreadful thing when we can participate in sin and experience no guilt. Now, David is guilty of sin whether he feels or experiences it at all. Guilt is the result of doing something that is displeasing to God. But to be "smitten in the heart", to feel or sense our guilt is a great grace and the work of the Spirit.

### ***The Prayer***

David's response to sensing his guilt is to confess his sin. This is the only proper response to our heart, our conscious "smiting" us. This is the only way to properly deal with guilt. Having sinned against God, we must repent, turning away from our sin and confessing our sin to God.

David's prayer also reflects a mature understanding of a Biblical confession.

He acknowledges his guilt before God. He affirms that what he has done is sin. It is wrong. He has disobeyed God.

He acknowledges that he has sinned against God. While we often sin against people, we must acknowledge that ALL sin is against God.

He humbly asks for forgiveness. The way this is worded reflects an Old Covenant understanding of sin. He requests the removal of the stain of sin. So he is seeking to have his sin erased from his record and his standing before God restored.

He confesses his own foolishness. Not all foolishness is sin. But all involves foolishness. David plowed ahead with his actions over against warning and appeals from Joab. To fail to heed the Biblical advice, counsel and warnings of godly people is foolish.

Here is a helpful blueprint for us:

Confess your sin by name and acknowledge your guilt before God.

Do not minimize your sin. Acknowledge that you have sinned against God.

Humbly ask for forgiveness, first of those you have sinned against and from God.

Acknowledge what led to your sinning so that you will be more aware and less inclined to the same folly again.

May the Lord grant you the grace of guilt and conviction so that you will confess your sin and be forgiven by God (1 John 1:9-10).

## **The Consequences (24:11-25)**

All sin has consequences. Additionally, David's sin is used by God to bring chastening on Israel...

### ***The Punishment (24:11-15)***

<sup>11</sup> And when David arose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, <sup>12</sup> "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.' " <sup>13</sup> 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." <sup>14</sup> 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."

### **Its Nature (24:11-13)**

The prophet Gad is sent by the Lord to respond to David. David may be the king, but he still needs the Word from God. That Word from God comes through the prophet, the preacher. Gad brings a message directly from God for David.

Remember that the purpose of God is to punish Israel for her provoking God. We don't know the specific sin, but we know their general tendency toward, pride, complaining

and idolatry. So, God allows David to choose one of three punishments for taking the census. He must pick the rod he is going to smitten with.

Three years of famine and the deprivation and hardship that would come with it.

Three months of military defeat and the death and humiliation that would come with it.

Three days of plague and the fear and death that would come with it.

### **Its Number (24:14-15)**

David casts himself upon the mercy of God. He does not want the death and destruction that would come at the hand of vengeful men. So while he knows there will be punishment and the suffering attendant with it, he still falls upon God's mercy.

### ***The Pardon (24:15)***

<sup>15</sup> 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.

God chooses the plague, which results in 70,000 deaths throughout Israel. From Dan to Beersheba is a way of saying "all over the nation". But it has the sense of traveling, traversing, spreading. The plague spread across the nation. It resulted in the deaths of 70,000 men. It is possible that it means people, but the way it is worded points to the death of men. Imagine what this looks like. Over 9 plus months, census takers come across the land and count the able-bodied men who could fight in the army. Within a few weeks, and for three months, in every town and village, men are dying. Families with no husband and older sons.

The plague is the result of the death angel. Our author is pointing us to the Exodus where the death angel went throughout Egypt killing the first born as the last of the plagues against Egypt. Israel will remember that God always wants them to act like who they are. If they act like the Egyptians, sometimes they are treated like the Egyptians. The form of punishment that God has chosen here (plague versus famine) is significant and should point them back to Exodus.

Now, there is a very great difference between the believer in the Old Covenant under the Mosaic Law and the believer in the New Covenant under grace. In the Old Testament, very few of the Israelites actually were true believers in the Lord. This becomes even more so as Israel grows in number and over their history this becomes even more. The punishment here is entirely just - because God can only do what is just. It is curious that we do not know the specific sin. I think partially because the author is wanting us to see the underlying principles.

### ***The Petition (24:16-17)***

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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."

God decides that the punishment is enough. So He stops the death angel just as he is about to afflict the people of Jerusalem. The angel was at a certain threshing floor, a location that would be well known to anyone reading this book.

David prays to the Lord:

He once again confesses his sin to the Lord. As far as he knows, the consequences are for his sin alone.

He also asks the Lord to have mercy on the sheep and to afflict the shepherd instead. He seeks not only to mediate for the people but to bear the punishment himself.

### ***The Purchase (24:18–25)***

Sin deserves punishment. Mercy requires sacrifice. For the punishment to stop, sacrifice must be offered.

<sup>18</sup> 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.” <sup>19</sup> So David went up at Gad’s word, as the Lord commanded. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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.” <sup>22</sup> 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.” <sup>23</sup> All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king.” And Araunah said to the king, “May the Lord your God accept you.” <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> 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.

David is instructed to buy a certain threshing floor, build an altar there, and make a sacrifice to the Lord. So David goes and is meant by the owner of the threshing floor. When the owner finds out the king wants to buy it, he offers to give to David all that is needed for the sacrifice. David refuses the gift but rather offers to pay. He will buy the threshing floor, the materials for the altar and the animals for the sacrifices. Why? Because he will not offer sacrifices to God that have cost him nothing.

These events are recorded in **1 Chronicles 21:18–22:1**.

<sup>18</sup> Now the angel of the LORD had commanded Gad to say to David that David should go up and raise an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. <sup>19</sup> So David went up at Gad’s word, which he had spoken in the name of the LORD. <sup>20</sup> Now Ornan was threshing wheat. He turned and saw the angel, and his four sons who were with him hid themselves. <sup>21</sup> As David came to Ornan, Ornan looked and saw David and went out from the threshing floor and paid homage to David with his face to the ground. <sup>22</sup> And David said to Ornan, “Give me the site of the threshing floor that I may build on it an altar to the LORD—give it to me at its full price—that the plague may be averted from the people.” <sup>23</sup> Then Ornan said to David, “Take it, and let my lord the king do what seems good

to him. See, I give the oxen for burnt offerings and the threshing sledges for the wood and the wheat for a grain offering; I give it all.”<sup>24</sup> But King David said to Ornan, “No, but I will buy them for the full price. I will not take for the LORD what is yours, nor offer burnt offerings that cost me nothing.”<sup>25</sup> So David paid Ornan 600 shekels of gold by weight for the site.<sup>26</sup> And David built there an altar to the LORD and presented burnt offerings and peace offerings and called on the LORD, and the LORD answered him with fire from heaven upon the altar of burnt offering.<sup>27</sup> Then the LORD commanded the angel, and he put his sword back into its sheath.

<sup>28</sup> At that time, when David saw that the LORD had answered him at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, he sacrificed there.<sup>29</sup> For the tabernacle of the LORD, which Moses had made in the wilderness, and the altar of burnt offering were at that time in the high place at Gibeon,<sup>30</sup> but David could not go before it to inquire of God, for he was afraid of the sword of the angel of the LORD.

<sup>1</sup> Then David said, “Here shall be the house of the LORD God and here the altar of burnt offering for Israel.”

David builds an altar and offers up the sacrifices. He offers a burnt offering and a peace offering. Satisfied, the Lord ends the plague.

I think this is why this event is recorded. Israelites would know this site. We may not but the original readers would look up towards this hill and see Temple standing there. Where God

One author helps us think about this:

The sacrifices were duly offered and we are told with majestic simplicity that ‘**The Lord answered prayer on behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped**’ (24:25). Jesus Christ is himself the true sacrifice. It is to him that David’s sacrifices pointed. He is the substance of which David’s offerings were only pictures, emblems and shadows. David knew this. He never imagined that animal blood atoned for sin. David was a prophet who was looking ahead to the risen Christ (Acts 2:30-31). Jesus Christ and the gospel of saving grace are the message and meaning of David’s life and ministry as recorded in 2 Samuel. [Keddie, p. 245]

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## Reflect and Respond

And so we close the book and this series with one final connected Psalm.

### Psalm 51:14–17

<sup>14</sup> Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

<sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.

<sup>16</sup> For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;  
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

<sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Our sin? Our suffering? Our sacrifice... Our savior...