

DAVID BUILDS AN ALTER TO THE LORD

2 Samuel 24:1-25

Key Verse: 24:25

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.

Sometimes, how a person handles the aftermath of his mistake shows more about his character than his mistake *per se*. In today's passage, David commits a sin and God punishes his people for the sin. After realizing what he had done, David repented from his heart and pleaded for God's mercy. When David saw the sufferings of his people from a devastating plague, his heart ached. Even God was grieved. David built an altar to the Lord and interceded on behalf of his people. God heard his plea and answered his prayer for his people. David's actions showed why he's called a shepherd king and a man after God's own heart.

I. DAVID'S FOOLISH DECISION (1-9)

Look at verse 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."* After many years of war with enemies, the kingdom of Israel was finally at peace. This is when David made a foolish decision. He decided to take a census of Israel and Judah to count the number of the fighting men in the kingdom. He wanted to know how strong his army was. David had made many good decisions in difficult situations. It was when he was complacent he became vulnerable. Remember he also committed the sin of adultery when he idly walked around the rooftop of his palace. This is true with us. When we become complacent or lazy, Satan can seize the moment to tempt us.

In fact, 1 Chronicles 21:1 states that it was Satan that rose up against Israel and incited David to take the census. But verse 1 here says it was God who incited David to do the foolish thing. How can we reconcile this seeming discrepancy? I think what happened was that first David had a desire in his heart for a census which Satan used to incite him. And then God allowed it to happen. God does not cause people to sin, but he does allow them to reveal their sinful nature through their actions. Satan might have incited David but it was God who allowed it. Now, if God allowed it, was David still responsible for the sin? Yes, this sin originated in his heart. Satan merely used his desire to incite him. In fact, verse 10 says that David was conscience-stricken after the census. This indicates that David was guilty of the sin by his own admission. He had taken his eyes off of the Lord and looked at the size of his army.



The U.S. government spends billions of dollars every ten years to take a census. The 2010 census cost \$13 billion. It was found that the U.S. population was about 310 million. The government uses the census data to draw congressional districts and implement various social policies. So what was wrong for David to take a census? It was his pride that prompted this decision. He didn't depend on God fully. He tried to depend on the strength of his army. God had given him all the victories he won against the enemies. It was sin for him to rely on the strength of his army now, after all that God had done. When God told Moses to take a census of the Israelites during their exodus from Egypt, he taught the principle that all people belonged to God and each person must be redeemed by paying a ransom, whether he were rich or poor (Ex 30:12). According to the ancient custom, only the owner could count what belonged to him, like the owner of a herd could count the number of his sheep. The people of Israel did not belong to David. They belonged to God. It was wrong for David to take a census.

Of course, David's real intention was to count the number of fighting men in Israel. He thought it was a good idea to know how strong his army was in case a war breaks out with one of the enemies surrounding his kingdom. He ordered Joab, the commander of his army: "Go throughout the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba and enroll the fighting men, so that I may know how many there are" (2). But all the victories against the enemies were given by God. Even Job recognized this and advised against the king's decision. He said to David: "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?" (3) But the king overruled Joab and other army commanders (4). They conducted the census to enroll the fighting men of Israel.

As God's people, what is the danger of "taking a census"? First of all, we should remember that everything we own comes from God. Our life itself was given to us by God as a gift. So anything or everything we own is also from God. Let us not be mistaken to think that we can do great things apart from God. It is also dangerous to rely on human means rather than God. When we depend on human means, we may wrongly attribute God's work to humans or pure coincidence when it is really God who makes it possible. A woman had cancer and she was told that her prognosis was not good. Still, everyone earnestly prayed for her. And God miraculously healed her. Sadly she attributed her healing to chemotherapy rather than God. This can easily happen to us if we set our eyes on things we possess rather than on God.

At the end of the census which took 9 months and 20 days, Joab reported the number of the fighting men to the king. In Israel, there were 800,000 able-bodied men who could handle a sword and in Judah 500,000. The total number was a force of 1.3 million trained fighters. It was an impressive number, considering the U.S. Army has about 500,000 active duty servicemen, though we also have National Guard, Army Reserve, Coast Guard, Navy, Marines and Air Force (about 3 million in all with about half of them as reserves.)

II. DAVID'S REPENTANCE (10-14)

Look at verse 10. *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."* David was conscience-stricken after the census. He confessed his sins before God and pleaded for his mercy. He prayed to God: "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." David realized it was a foolish thing to depend on the size of his fighting men. After all, it was he who experienced time and again how his small army defeated many enemies that vastly outnumbered them, only because God was with them.

David's repentance was sincere. He didn't make any excuses. He didn't become defensive. He was straightforward. He said, "I have sinned," and "I have done a foolish thing." I believe that this is the quality that set David apart from other men like King Saul. When he realized his sin, he repented it from his heart. He was honest about it. His words were not a lip service uttered before people. King Saul used similar words like "I have sinned." But his words were not from his heart. He was not sincere. He said the right things to project himself sanctimonious before people. But David's repentance was before God. We should know that God is pleased with our repentance only when it comes from our hearts.

What was God's answer to David's plea? Before David got up the next morning, the word of God had come to a prophet named Gad. Basically, God gave David three options to choose from as a punishment. God wasn't going to sweep the sin under rug and say to David and his people, "Don't worry about it." God had told his people that they should expect blessings for obeying his words and punishments for disobedience (Dt 28).



Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-92) said, "A sin ... though it is committed by a man after God's heart, is not overlooked Sin cannot be winked at by the Most High! Sin is exceedingly sinful. When I see David and the elders of Israel with sackcloth on their loins and ashes on their heads, bowing before this angel, I discern that there is a something in sin which ought to make us hide our heads and weep, and wail, and humble ourselves before the Most High! Let us wake up to a sense of the dire reality of transgression— ... That sin must be punished is taught here with equal distinctness. This looks like a platitude, but it is so often disputed, that we are constrained to assert it and to reassert it. Yes, we sound it forth as with a trumpet, that wherever there is an iniquity, there must be a penalty, for sin must be punished!"

Spurgeon told a story of a man who came to him to say, “Sir, I want to know how my sin can be forgiven.” Spurgeon answered: “by the blood of Christ.” The man said, “Yes, but I do not understand that. What I need to know is this: if God does not punish me for what I have done, all I have to say is, He ought.” This is a common reaction of people when they first hear the message of the gospel. They would ask, “How can all my terrible sins be forgiven without my paying the price?” What they do not know is that God indeed punished someone for their sins. Jesus, the Son of God, shed his innocent blood on the cross to pay for the price of our sins.

Back to today’s passage, God taught David that he and his people had to be punished for their sins. What were the three options? Behind Door #1 was three years of famine. Behind Door #2 was three months of fleeing from their enemies. And three days of plague in the land was behind Door #3. The prophet Gad said to David, “Now then, think it over and decide how I should answer the one who sent me” (13).



What was David’s reaction to God’s punishment for his sin? David said to Gad, “I am in deep distress” (14a). Each of the three options would have a devastating impact on his people. How could he watch the sufferings of his people with his eyes when it was he who sinned before God? David was in deep distress. But the reality was that he had to choose an option. He had no choice.

What did he choose? David said, “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” (14b). David chose the third option. Why? He had just witnessed three years of devastating famine on his people (21:1). He still had the vivid images in his mind of little children slowly withering from starvation in the arms of their mothers. How could he bear to watch such a thing again? What about the option #2? He knew well the effects of a war on his people, especially if they had to flee from their enemies for three months.

So David chose the third option, that is, three days of plague. He knew also that a widespread pestilence would have a devastating impact on the population. It was distressing to think about how his people would suffer because of his wrongdoing. Still, he thought that it was better for them to fall into the hands of God rather than suffer in the hands of their enemies. He wanted to hang on to the fact that God is merciful. When we were little children, we were afraid of a punishment by our parents. But if we had to be punished, we would rather be spanked by our own parents, not by some other people, because we knew that our parents loved us.

III. DAVID, A SHEPHERD KING (15-25)

Look at verses 15-16. *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. 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. 70,000 Israelites died already from the plague. Now the angel of the Lord was standing at the threshing floor overlooking Jerusalem, with his hand stretched out to destroy the city. The suffering of the people was so severe that even the Lord was grieved. His heart ached even as he punished the people. Finally, he said to the angel who was afflicting the people, *“Enough! Withdraw your hand.”*

Let us read verse 17 together. *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.”* David pleaded with God on behalf of his people whom he called, “sheep.” He said, “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.” He was willing to suffer personally for his sheep. We see the image of a shepherd in David. It is the image of our Lord Jesus. His heart was broken when he saw his people suffering. He was willing to lay down his life for the sheep. He was different from most politicians today who often act in a selfish manner at the expense of people. When they get caught doing something wrong, they would testify, “I don’t recall. My memory is fuzzy on that.”

What direction did God give David? Through his servant Gad, the Lord told David, “Go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.” Threshing floor was located on top of a hill where wind could be used to separate grains and husks. We are told that the threshing floor of Araunah was on the top of Mt. Moriah where Abraham took his son Isaac to sacrifice (Ge 22:2). It was a spiritually and historically meaningful place for David to build an altar to the Lord (1Ch 22:1). Later, Solomon would build the temple on the same place.

In order to build an altar to the Lord, David wanted to buy the threshing floor from the owner. At this point, Araunah offered it to David for free. He also offered oxen for burnt offering and threshing sledges and yokes for the wood, saying, “May the Lord your God accept you” (22-23). It was a tempting offer. No one would have blamed King David for taking the land to build an altar. But David insisted on paying for everything. He said, “I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.” David didn’t want to bring to God offerings that did not cost him anything. He wanted to offer the offerings from his heart. He didn’t want to go through the motion as a religious ritual. Look at verse 25. *“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.”* God accepted David’s offerings and answered his prayer for his people.

Thank God for helping us to study the book of 2 Samuel this summer. After more than 400 years since they entered the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, God used David to establish the united kingdom of Israel. The country was finally at peace. God had fulfilled his promise to his servant Abraham. In the process, however, David committed sins of adultery and murder. Still, the Bible calls him a man after God’s own heart (Ac 13:22). Why? It’s because he repented his sins from his heart.

David trusted God. He was grateful to God for his mercy and love. He loved God. He had the fear of the Lord. Many psalms he wrote testify how much he loved God.

David was a warrior. He killed Goliath. He conquered many enemies. He overcame rebellions. But he was a shepherd king, not a cunning politician. He trusted God and loved his people. God used him preciously. David was wrong in taking the census, but what he did in this chapter outweighed his mistake. His sincere repentance, choosing option #3 because of his faith in God's mercy, and his shepherd's heart towards his people whom he called "sheep" and his intercessory prayer for them with sacrificial offerings moved the heart of God. It was fitting to end the book of Samuel while David interceded for his people as their shepherd King. David played the role of mediator between God and his people. Later, Jesus came to become our eternal high priest to intercede for the atonement of our sins by shedding his own blood on the cross. May God help us to be good shepherds by following the footsteps of Jesus, our Chief Shepherd!