

David's Fall

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[0 : 00] Okay, well we're going to look back at Psalm 24. So if you have your Bibles, it will be helpful because we'll hopefully stay close to the text.

I know this has been said more than once in this series, but I hope it was clear to you when we were reading this passage that there are, that this passage raises many questions that are obviously difficult.

Namely, take for example in verse one, God is angry and we don't know why he's angry, or at least the text doesn't say. And then God, the word in our ESV uses it in sites, God incites David to take a census and then David gets in trouble for taking the census.

And so this passage raises a lot of questions. And what I want to do tonight is if you notice the text is in three different sections, or at least in my Bible it is, it's flipped in three sections, I want to ask one question of each section in this passage.

In the first section I want to ask why the anger, and then I want to ask why the mercy, and then finally why the altar in the final section.

[1 : 23] And then as we're going through those three questions as a way of thinking through the text and what it means for David and what it means for us, I hope a fourth question lingers in the back of your mind, which is of all the stories to tell, why does the author of first and second Samuel end the life of the greatest king who ever lived with this weird story about a census gone wrong?

You know, you could say, well, he knew that first king was going to pick up the rest of the story, but the writer of first and second Samuel chose to end the story of David's life from his perspective with this story.

And I want to ask why is that? Is there a reason? And I hope that by the end of this sermon I can convince you why it's fitting that this be the final testimony of first and second Samuel about King David.

Okay, so the first question I want to ask tonight, why the anger? So in verse one, you see it says, again, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, go and number the people.

And so the obvious question is, why is God angry? And the answer to that question, which I'm sure you're all dying to know is, we have no idea. And I've looked through quite a few commentaries, and every now and then a guy will look back in first and second Samuel, and he'll try to pick a moment in history where Israel did something wrong, and he'll say, well, that's why he was angry, but no one really knows, that we have no idea why God was angry here.

[3 : 00] And what that means is, when we come to this passage, we have to be willing to accept the fact of God's anger, even though we don't know what brought it about in the first place.

And accepting that means also accepting the fact that our God is under no obligation to explain all of his ways to us.

What we can say for sure is that in this context, what must be true of divine anger is, I think the temptation is when you see anger, and you don't see an explanation, you think, well, maybe it's like human anger, where people sometimes get angry for no reason, and it's wrong.

But that can't be what God is doing here, because of the testimony of the rest of scripture, where God's anger in scripture is always justified. One theologian, Donald MacLeod, he defines God's anger like this.

He says, God's anger, divine anger, is the calm, deliberate, and proportionate way in which eternal and underlying holiness responds to sin.

[4 : 10] It's calm, it's deliberate, it's proportionate. But God's holiness responds to sin, and that's what his anger is. And while we're at it, we also don't know what it means when it says that God

incited David to take a census, because we know that, and we'll talk about why, we know that the census was wrong, because David gets punished for it.

And so we don't know why God would incite David to do something that was intrinsically sinful, or what that statement even means. And again, I look through all the commentaries, and no one has a great answer for this.

If you look, one thing that may add to the confusion or clarify things, this same story is told in 1 Chronicles, chapter 21. But what's interesting is, when you go to 1 Chronicles, chapter 21, it also says that someone incited David to take a census.

But over there it says it was Satan who incited David to take a census. And so you could say, well, this could be like the story of Job, where Satan tempts Job, but God is permitting it to happen so that in some sense they're both involved.

And maybe you could just leave it at that. I think I actually want to stop even before there and say really and truly, I don't think we know what verse one means.

[5 : 41] And I can hear your voice in my head saying, you're telling me I came to church tonight, just for you to tell me I don't know what this passage is about.

And that's what I'm saying about verse one. But I'm also saying that may actually be part of the point of verse one, that there is a message here for us, which is that God does things sometimes that we cannot explain, and that His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts. But the one thing we can be sure of is that in those places where we don't know what God is doing, it cannot be the case that God is less loving and less gracious than we originally thought.

It's always the case that whatever the underlying truth is, He is greater than we could imagine, not less great. Okay. So that's the most of what we for sure don't know.

But all that really does is just set the context for the passage. The real question of the passage is why is God angry about the census? And again, the passage doesn't tell us why God is angry about the census.

[6 : 49] But I think the reason here that it doesn't tell us why is because it actually assumes that we know why the census is wrong. And let me explain that for a moment.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong about a census, and that must be the case because earlier in Exodus and in Deuteronomy, God actually tells Moses to take a census, so that can't be intrinsically wrong.

And so what's going on here is the census is a sign for something deeper that's going on, something inside David's heart that God looks at and sees is wrong, and that if it's not dealt with now, it could get worse and worse.

And I want to take you back in the book of Samuel. So think before David, you had Saul. And before Saul, you had the prophet Samuel. And the people came to the prophet Samuel one day, and they begged Samuel for a king.

And Samuel goes to God, and God tells Samuel, you can give them a king. But when Samuel comes back to the people, and he tells them that he'll give them a king, he also gives them this ominous warning, this danger about what the future king will be like.

[8 : 03] And this is what Samuel says. Samuel says to the people who want a king, he says, be warned, these will be the ways of the king who will reign over you.

Listen to this. He says, Samuel says, the king that will reign over you will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots.

And I'm not going to read the whole passage, but Samuel goes on and says that when a king rules over you, he will take your daughters and the work in his house.

And he says, he'll take your fields, and he'll take the best of your produce. And ultimately, Samuel looks at the people and verbatim, he says, you will be his slaves, and you will cry out not for a king, but because of your king.

And Samuel is saying the tendency of all kings, of all human kings is that once they have power, they become selfish. And their tendency, their natural inclination is to take and to take and to take from the very people that they're meant to shepherd and to protect.

[9 : 13] And Samuel says, if we give you a king, if God gives you a king, your king will be no different than all the other kings who you so desperately want to mimic.

So you have this divine warning at the beginning of Samuel about the danger of power-hungryness. And then you come to 2 Samuel chapter 24 and look down at verse 9, and you see the reason why

David ordered a census, or at least I think you infer this.

In verse 9, it says that after they had gone in the country and taken the census, Joab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to the king. In Israel, they were 800,000 valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were 500,000.

And you hear that voice of Samuel saying, he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots. And I think the reason that this passage is reacting so strongly against the census is that there are no foreign enemies at the door.

But David is gathering all the people. He's going from village to village to village to find out where are the strong men. And most theologians interpret this as him trying to consolidate his power, to become strong.

[10:30] And whether that's fear or whether that's pride, we don't know, but David is taking power into his own hands and consolidating power. And he's in doing so.

He's no longer treating his people like the sheep that he shepherds. He's treating them like numbers on a balance sheet that tell him how strong he really is. And the way that the census is done shows you that this isn't like our censuses today.

You know, like, I have a neighbor here in Scotland who is a census. She works for the Scottish census. And she is the sweetest lady. And if she came to my door asking me about my children for the census, I wouldn't be afraid at all.

And I would tell her whatever she wanted to know. But David, when he takes his census, what is happening is the leaders of his army are going from village to village to village, looking for the sons of the people.

And you have to imagine if you're an old farmer in a place no one cares about, and one day these mighty men of David from Jerusalem show up to your door and they say, show us your sons.

[11:39] That's unnerving. And from that day on, right, isn't there something in the back of your mind wondering, when are they going to come for my son? When is David going to use my son to grow his nation?

And of course, war is not always evil, but I think that's in this context, that is what this passage is getting at, is that David is consolidating power when God has not demanded it in the first place.

And Walter Bruggeman, he's a commentator on this passage, he calls this an act of bureaucratic terrorism. And in the end, it takes nine months to count some 1.3 million men.

And again, what we see is the effect of David's sin. The sin is the taking of the census. We don't know what's going on inside David's heart, whether it's pride, whether he just thinks he can get away with it, whether it's fear, like he's worried about people at the door.

We don't know, but what we do know, and the point that I want to make here in this first part is that God was right to be angry. And sometimes we're afraid to talk about God's anger.

[12:49] And I think maybe we're afraid to talk about God's anger because we subconsciously think that God's anger and his love are mutually exclusive. So if we talk about God's anger, we're saying that he can't be loving.

Or it may be that we're afraid to talk about God's anger because it makes God look like a bad guy. That's never how the Bible, the Bible's never afraid to talk about a God who is angry because in the scriptures, God's anger is not a sign that he is uncontrollably emotional.

And it's much less a sign, it's not a sign that he's evil. What it is is, it's a sign that he is just and that he cares so much about what goes on in this world that when he sees injustice, he will not let it go unpunished ultimately.

So God loves David and we've seen this throughout 1st and 2nd Samuel. But that doesn't mean that he can't be angry with David's sin.

And he disciplines David and he hates the sin in David so much that he will put measures in place to keep David from sinning. And he will pursue David until David turns back to him.

[14:08] You know, and there is a really sad truth about God's anger that a person can so much reject God's love and with such a finality that in the end, all they know of God is his anger to the point where God can look at a person and say, depart from me, I never knew you.

But there is a kind of anger and a kind of punishment in God whose root is not hatred but it's love and it's the love of a father.

And if you're a Christian, it is right to say that God is angry with whatever sin exists in you and he will pursue those sins in you and in me relentlessly until they are erased from our hearts or as Paul

puts it, until they're murdered.

Paul uses violent language to talk about the way that God wants to destroy the sin that's inside of us. But he will do that not to destroy you but to make you perfect and to make you in the image of his son so that he can use his anger as a tool for mercy in us.

That's why Proverbs and then Hebrews quotes Proverbs and Hebrews says, my son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof because the Lord disciplines those he loves as a father, the son he delights in.

[15:40] God disciplines those who he delights in. So his anger can be painful as it is in this passage but it's also just and it can be restorative.

So the first question that this passage gives us is why the anger? And I hope I've shown that God is angry at this census not because his anger is arbitrary but because the census represented something dangerous in the life of Israel.

The second question I want to ask is why the mercy? So this passage moves from anger to punishment to mercy. And I want to ask why the mercy and this is a specific question, why in this passage does God choose to be merciful to David?

And so you see what happens? The prophet Gad comes to David as a result of God's anger at what David has done. And he says, David, I'm going to give you three choices.

Pestilence, plague, or you'll be chased. You'll have wars at your doorstep. And David says in verse 14, let me fall into the hand of the Lord for his mercy is great.

[16:54] So that rules out one of the options, war. And then what follows is this strange scene, right? I mean, this whole passage is strange but the strange scene where pestilence comes into the land and working in that pestilence is an angel bringing death.

And I think twice in this passage you see the phrase from Dan to bear sheba. That's a Hebrew colloquialism which might be like saying from Shetland to the borders.

Dan to bear sheba is saying the whole length of the countryside. This angel is going about bringing death and punishing David and the people for their sins.

And then in the midst of that, the angel stops where it is because God, it says God, he relented.

And then after the angel relents, God looks up to the Lord and says in verse 17, behold, I have sinned.

I've done wickedly, but these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father's house. And again, I don't know whether it was arrogance or whether it was fear or what it was that caused David to take the census and to try to consolidate power.

[18:16] But what this pestilence does is it reveals to David the reality of his situation that was true all along, which is that he is totally dependent on God for everything he has in this life.

He thought that he could consolidate power. He thought that he could take control. He thought that he could manage his destiny and God brings him to his knees and shows him that he is the one that's always been in control all along.

But there's also something positive about this too, because what does David do when he's brought to his knees? He doesn't double down on his sin and try to consolidate power even more.

He doesn't act like what he was doing really wasn't simple. He doesn't say, well, you know, we used to take censuses in the past. Why can't I keep doing this anymore? Moses took a census.

Now, what he does is when he realizes he has done wrong, he gets on his knees and he cries out to God for mercy. And that is what is always so beautiful about David's heart is that when he had nowhere else to go, he runs to the only place he was ever meant to go to all along, which is into God's mercy.

[19:30] And just as a side note, I think it's really significant here. If this is true that David was really consolidating power and he begins to see people as means to an end, I think it's really significant that in verse 14, you see what David calls his people.

He calls his people, excuse me, verse 17. He calls them his sheep. And I think in the midst of God punishing David, part of David coming to his senses, not his senses, his sin, well, it is, sorry, I'm getting confused about the word senses and senses.

Part of David coming to his senses is seeing his people again, how he was meant to see them, which is the sheep that God had called him to shepherd.

But the question that I'm actually trying to get at right now is why is God merciful in this passage? And do you see the explanation for why God is merciful in this passage?

Why does the angel stop? Why does God relent? Do you see it in the passage? You don't see it in the passage because it doesn't say why God relented.

[20 : 41] It just says he relented. But I think the explanation comes in verse 14, where David says, let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great.

So David knew something about God that was really important to know in a situation like this, which is that the way that he thought about God wasn't as someone who you just hope that maybe you'll catch in the right time, you know, because let me put it like this.

You could fall into the hands of evil men one day and you're at their mercy. You're literally at their mercy. They could do whatever they wanted to you and they're evil men and you know that.

You could ask them for mercy and they may show you mercy. But when you walk away from that situation, you won't say what wonderful, merciful men those evil men were.

What you'll say is I got lucky because that's not who they are. But what David says is what David does is he runs when he's in a jam, he runs into the arms of God, not hoping to get lucky, but because he knows the character of God.

[21 : 55] It is God's nature to be merciful. David would rather fall into the arms of God than try his luck with human beings.

He says God is merciful. And you know, it's when trials come in our lives, it's hard.

When trials come in our lives and we can see in those trials the fingerprints of our own sin and we know that some of the trials we face, we face because we have done wrong.

It's almost unbearable. And in moments of crisis, one of the temptations can be to hide our face from God and to run away from him because we fear him.

We don't want to face the truth of who we are. And I think there's a model in what David does here, which is that when he finds himself in misery of his own making and he knows that he has done wrong and he has wronged God, even so he knows that his only hope is to not hide from but God, but to move towards mercy and the only place that mercy is found is in God himself.

[23 : 14] God calls us to go where mercy can be found and that's in himself. So we've talked about why the anger and we've talked about why the mercy.

And thirdly, I want to talk about why the altar. And you see this in the last section and when I say why the altar, again, I'm asking a basic question, why does David build the altar?

Because sometimes people make sacrifices to God simply because they're rejoicing. And if you weren't reading this passage closely, you could think, well, God was angry.

God showed David mercy and in response to that mercy, David goes and builds an altar to celebrate this merciful God and that sounds nice and it's always a good idea to celebrate God when he's merciful.

But that's not what happens here. Do you see in the text why God, why David builds an altar? In verse 18 it says, Gad the prophet came to David that day and said to him, go and raise up an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor.

[24 : 23] The reason that David builds an altar is because God commands him to build an altar. And what that means is that the altar, the role the altar plays in this story is not an appendix.

It's not saying again that God, that David built the altar just to celebrate what had already happened. But the altar was actually essential to what God was doing in this moment.

The sacrifice is necessary to the story. Or if I could put it another way, David's guilt is not finally dealt with the moment he asks for forgiveness.

It wasn't enough for David just to ask for forgiveness and to ask for mercy. David also had to offer a sacrifice. He had to pay a penalty for the guilt that he owed to God.

And so the altar is not arbitrary and the assumption here, and this is an important assumption, the assumption here is that God is not just merciful. He is merciful, but he's also just.

[25 : 32] And that means that when God shows David mercy, justice must also be done, which means that David's sin has to be accounted for.

There has to be a payment made for what David has done. And that's illustrating a universal truth, right?

Whenever God is merciful, and this is always ever and always true. Whenever God is merciful, he is always just.

And that means that whenever God is merciful to us, he is always just. And whatever sins we have ever committed, they have to be paid for. They have to be atoned for.

They have to be dealt with. And that means that when we go to God and we ask for God's mercy to cover our sins and to forgive us, we need to do more than just ask for forgiveness.

[26 : 36] We have to go to God hanging on to an altar. We don't just need mercy. We need an altar that we can take to God and say, God, you see here, my sins have been paid for.

They've been atoned for. And that's what we have in Jesus Christ. We go to God and God shows us the gravity of our sins.

And we see the weight, the awful penalty that such sins would require. And then we look at Jesus and we look at God and we say, you see, there has been a sacrifice made and these sins have been paid for.

And the beauty of a story like that is one of the things I love about this story in David is it's not just that David figured out a way to manipulate God.

He worked his way around the system and figured out how to earn God's mercy. God came to David and said, here's how you can be made right with me. And what God does for us in Jesus Christ is he commands a payment to be made for our sins, but he's also the one that comes in the person of Jesus Christ and pays for those sins himself.

[27 : 54] God demands a sacrifice and he comes and he becomes a sacrifice. I think that's good news.

But there were four questions I wanted to ask tonight. So that was why the anger, why the mercy, why the altar. And then finally, why does the story end here, this bizarre, theologically awkward story?

And here's the answer I want to propose. You think here is David. Think about the person that we've seen in David.

He is, no one disputes the fact that he was Israel's greatest king. He conquered giants. He slayed the people's enemies. He was a warrior and we've seen him fall, but even so, he's still the greatest king that Israel ever had.

And this could, we could go out on this story and say he was unmatched in his greatness. But what Psalm 24 does is it brings the greatest king Israel had ever known to its knees.

[29 : 05] And it reminds even the king that all he has in the presence of God, all he has to stand before the presence of God is God's own mercy.

Where does David's power lay? It doesn't lay in the strength of his armies, which he wanted it to lay in. It lays in the fact that his God sees him and loves him and forgives him despite of his inequities. And that's a truth that lingers for all of us, right? To be a follower of God is to base our identity completely on God's love and on God's mercy.

So that when we come before God and we ask ourselves, you know, we're haunted by these questions, what right do you have to talk to God?

The answer that we have is that God is merciful and that he's provided a sacrifice. And I think that this story humbled David. It brought him to his knees, but it also caused him to rejoice.

[30 : 08] That was good news to him that even though he had sinned, God could redeem him. And there's a really interesting way this story plays into the rest of the Old Testament, which is if you go read the same story in 1 Chronicles 22, 21, when it gets to 1 Chronicles 22.

So Arun of the Jebusite, we know later if you read 1 Chronicles 21, is sitting in Jerusalem. That's where the angel stops his destruction.

And just after David makes his sacrifice at the threshing floor of Arun of the Jebusite, in 1 Chronicles 22, 1, David stands on the threshing floor and as he finishes his sacrifice, he says, here shall be the house of the Lord God and here the altar of burnt offering for Israel.

And that moment, he begins to make plans for what will become the temple in Jerusalem. So he builds the temple in Jerusalem at this site.

And I think that's so powerful and so suggestive because this was the site where the bloodshed stopped and where God relented and showed his people mercy.

[31 : 26] And it's also the place where David realized that his whole identity revolved around God being merciful to him, not how powerful he was.

And so what this does is, as David sets this temple in Jerusalem, it's this visible reminder forever and always that what we all have in common as we gather here and worship and as those Jews worshiped in Jerusalem was the fact that we bring nothing to the table when we come and worship and we speak to God.

All we bring to the table is what God has given us, which is the faith we have in Jesus Christ that he is the sacrifice that's covered our sins.

I think I finished my sermon about two minutes early, so I'm going to add one more fact to this.

There's a suggestion made by one theologian that I want to leave you with, which is that if you go all the way back to the beginning of 1 Samuel, the story is told of Hannah, who was barren.

And Hannah was a woman without hope because in those days, to be barren was essentially to be without hope. And she would go to the temple year after year and she would pray to God for a child.

[32 : 44] And here is this woman who all she has going for her is her prayers. And God answers her prayers and she sees that it was right that her only hope in life was God.

That's how the book of 1 Samuel starts. And then think of how 2 Samuel ends. A man who is as great as he could be and yet the greatest lesson of his life is that he's just like Hannah, that all he has before God is a prayer and a prayer that God can listen to him.

And that's all we have. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are our God and highest heaven. And yet you love us and you redeem us and you show us mercy.

And we pray that you would make us people who are loving and merciful and who want to share the good news of this gospel far and wide. And we ask all this in your son's name. Amen.