

2 Samuel 24

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[0 : 00] Do sit and turn to 2 Samuel 24. Here we are at the end of 2 Samuel.!

And so the conclusion of the narrative of the story, as I read it, it doesn't feel much like a climax, does it? You could almost say that chapter 24 of 2 Samuel, it's the complete opposite. It leaves us asking, what was the author of 2 Samuel thinking? Why would the author of 2 Samuel forego an opportunity to paint a glowing picture of David's long and fruitful reign as the king of Israel?

If he was going to choose one cameo from David's era to demonstrate what David's life and rule was all about, surely he could have found something more complimentary, couldn't he?

Why does he choose to finish the book of 2 Samuel with this confusing tale about David's sin that's hard to work out what's going on? But that is what he does, isn't it?

[1 : 24] And what we have here at the end of 2 Samuel is very surprising, I think. But it's purposeful. There's three sections to the chapter.

There's first the census in verse 1 to 9. And then there's the judgment in verses 10 to 17. And then there's the atonement in verses 18 to 25. So firstly, the census.

Come back with me to verse 1. Again, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. And he, that is the Lord, incited David against them, saying, go number Israel and Judah.

And so we discover once again here that the Israelites are under God's anger. We're not told why they're under God's anger, because I presume it's not important for the text to explain that.

What it was that had upset God. It's simply important for you and I to know that God was angry at the start of chapter 24. That's all the explanation that's offered. And it starts with another great surprise, isn't it?

[2 : 33] Look what it says. It says that God incited David to do something that we will soon learn was very wrong for him to do. And that's immediately very troubling, isn't it?

Why would God do that? In what sense does God ever provoke someone to sin? Well, of course, verse 1 doesn't tell the whole story.

And we learn that this was something David actually wanted to do. Whatever prompting the Lord gave him, it doesn't relieve David of his responsibility for his sin.

The rest of the chapter makes that really clear. But what we are being told is that God expresses his anger by giving David over to the sin. There's a sense in which he leads him into it.

Because Israel needs the discipline that David's sin are going to take them into. We need to be really clear, don't we?

[3 : 39] We need to be absolutely clear. The Bible makes the point in other places that God never sins. Neither does God tempt people to sin. So we must conclude that that is not what is going on here.

But it's important that we don't shy away from the language here. That God is taking some righteous initiative to set in motion a series of events that will serve to discipline and chastise Israel. And bring them in the end to repentance. We're being reminded, aren't we, right at the start of chapter 24, of the complete and utter sovereignty of God in his world.

God is in control of all things, even when his people sin. And I think that's a very difficult thought for you and I to get our head around, but it's vital we do it. What David does next is his own fault, but it's also an outworking of the Lord's anger burning against his people.

Because we see in verse 2, can you look down? 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.

[4 : 56] God may wish, may have wished that David just dismiss this suggestion out of hand. But the tragedy is that David seems to think it's a very good idea, but it obviously isn't.

I say that from our point of view, but it's not immediately obvious why that is the case. What is wrong with taking a census? What is wrong with counting the people? What's the big deal of counting the people of Israel?

Why is that a crime in God's eyes? And again, I think we need to admit, the text doesn't actually tell us. And so we've got to conclude, it's not actually vital for you and I to know why in chapter 24. And so we may not know for sure, but the text leaves us in no doubt, it was a big error. Verse 1 implies that it's a sin, and Joab's reaction in verse 3 makes it clear that he thought it was a sin. And then David's own repentance in verses 10 to 17, especially underline that point. David comes to see that it was a sin. It was clearly the wrong thing to do.

[6 : 05] And I can only guess that the real issue here is one of pride. Perhaps David wants to count the fighting men so he can revel in his own strength. Perhaps he wants to count all the men so that it would seem to him a sound basis for the battle that was ahead.

A confidence. But of course, David's confidence should have been in God. And David's boasting should have been in God's strength and not his own.

And the size of the nation was meant to be a testimony to God's faithfulness and the promises that God had made to Abraham. Abraham. And so if David's people were as many as the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the seashore, it was only because God had blessed them.

And God had strengthened them. And so for David to find his assurance or perhaps to fuel his ambition could amount to a failure to trust God. A kind of misplaced confidence that would grieve God.

And I suspect that's what's going on here. But the fact that it was a sinful action is not lost on Joab, David's commander. And if you followed the story along with me, you will know that Joab is not really known, is he, for having a sensitive conscience.

[7 : 26] Thank you for that. So if Joab thought it was wrong, it was obvious. It must have been wrong. We read in verse 3, he objects to David's proposed course of action.

But in verse 4, we learn that David's perseverance overcomes Joab's caution. David will not be dissuaded from his path.

And so Joab and the other soldiers do, the other commanders do what good soldiers do in that situation. Even though they don't like it, they obey. Verses 5 to 8, they travel all over the land to fulfill the king's wishes.

Nine months, 20 days later, they come back to David with a report. And they say, verse 9, 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. Well, the text then takes a turn, doesn't it? The story changes. And no sooner has David shared the report than he's struck with a major case of the guilt.

[8 : 31] Unlike his predecessor, Saul, do you remember him? There is no self-justification or what we might call sin minimization. All we have in verse 10 is genuine contriteness.

Look at verse 10. But David's heart struck him after he'd numbered the people. And David said to the Lord, I have sinned greatly in what I've done.

But now, O Lord, please take away the iniquity of your servant, for I have done very foolishly. So secondly, judgment. That is David's judgment on his actions, isn't it?

He considers it a great sin. He recognizes he is a guilty man before God and he calls it a very foolish thing. His judgment seems penitent.

Penitent. And yet, as always, God's judgment matters more than his. And we hear through this prophet named Gad. Gad has been a prophet of David for some time.

[9 : 33] We've heard about him before in the narrative. These court prophets or seers and they're like the king's personal chaplains. And he tells us, while David was still sleeping, the very next day, Gad sets out to find the king and to give him the Lord's message.

It's curious, isn't it? He comes to David. He gives David three options. God gives David three options for the punishment for his sin. Implicitly, that message underlines David's guilt, doesn't it? It underlines David's guilt, but there's inbuilt mercy when it comes to the punishment. David may choose one of three options. One, three years of famine. Three months of being pursued by his enemies.

Or three days of plague in the land. David cheers for the three options. He rules out number two. He knows he wants to be spared by his enemies. But he's happy for the Lord to choose which one of the other two.

There's a measure, I think, of self-interest in David's choice here. That is, he wants to avoid the one that would have been probably most difficult for him personally.

[10:41] But perhaps more striking, I think, is verse 14. Look at verse 14. David's plea for mercy.

Then David said to God, 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. David's logic is that it's better to be in the Lord's hands when he is angry with you than to be in the hands of your enemies.

And that, he says, is because the Lord is greatly merciful. And that's interesting, isn't it? You notice he's not making light of the Lord's wrath. He knows it's a serious business.

And in verse 14, it tells us he was in deep distress as he contemplated these punishments. The anger of God with him. Even as he stares down the barrel of God's wrath, he is in no doubt of God's mercy.

[11:44] And I wonder if that's a great lesson to you and I, if we often see God's mercy as the exception to the rule with God.

Perhaps we think of God like David thought of his enemies. Perhaps we assume that God is harsh most of the time or unfeeling. That's his default position.

He's committed to discipline. But I think David's conviction here should challenge some of those assumptions. He sees God's wrath for what it is. He fears it. But he counts on God's mercy.

He assumes that being merciful is God's natural disposition. He doesn't just hope for a little bit of mercy to fall from the master's table. Instead, he believes the Lord's mercy is great.

Verse 14, I think, is the key verse for the chapter. It's a superb verse, isn't it? And straight after it, we see the punishment being delivered. And yet, even that punishment is not without that mercy that David sought.

[12:54] You notice the Lord chooses the shortest of the punishments. And yet the plague that he brought was very severe. Verse 15, 70,000 deaths. And that is, isn't it, a far more grisly count than the one David had arranged at the start of the chapter.

And then we have verse 16, which I think is nearly as important as verse 14. Let me read it to you. And when the angel stretched out his hand towards 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. Now stay your hand. And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of a run of the Jebusite.

God's love for his people, you see in that verse, causes him to be grieved, even to see the punishment that he himself has decreed. And that is a very important insight into God's character. God is overseeing a punishment that he has ordered, that these people utterly deserve, but he is not a dispassionate observer of it.

[14:09] In his justice, he nevertheless weeps with compassion. Even in his wrath, he is filled with mercy. David was right, you see.

And we should bear that picture in mind, shouldn't we? Whenever we think or we speak about God's wrath, it's a sublime, it's a crucial insight into what God is like.

For those of you who know the prayer of humble access, we sometimes say it before the Lord's Supper. It says this, his nature is always to have mercy.

His nature is always to have mercy. And that's what David is saying about God. His nature is always to have mercy, and the text proves him right.

Even in his wrath, he remembers mercy. And here it causes him to stay the angel's hand. You notice in verse 17, David is similarly distressed to see the vengeance being wrought in his people.

[15:11] And in verse 17, he offers to step in. I think it's lovely that even in a chapter that is filled with David's sin, here is a picture of David's very best. In verse 17, David is a shepherd to his people again.

He would rather stand in for them under judgment than see them suffer. And of course, good shepherds always think like that, don't they? We know that the best shepherd did.

Verse 17, 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, these sheep, what have they

done?

And David might have had God's compassion at that point, but he doesn't have God's power. The plague is halted not because of David's empathy and not because of David's concern.

The plague is halted because of God's love and power. David counted on God's mercy and God proves himself worthy of that trust.

[16:18] And he's not done. Not only does God halt the plague, but he also makes a way for things to be put right. Up to this point, God's wrath has been stopped.

It's been stayed, but it hasn't yet been satisfied. And atonement still needs to be made. So the third part of the chapter is that atonement. Once again, it's God's initiative, isn't it?

God's the one who takes the initiative. He speaks in the third section, David through the prophet Gad. Can you see verse 18? Gad came that day to David and said to him, go up, raise an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of a runner of the Jebusite.

And then in verse 19, we're told of David's obedience. So David went up at Gad's word as the Lord commanded. Then there's this negotiation with a runner for the purchase of the threshing floor.

A negotiation that ends when David insists that he must not sacrifice something that doesn't cost him anything, verse 24. And then verse 25, the final verse of the chapter, the sacrifice of atonement is offered.

[17:23] David built an altar to the Lord there and he sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. And what's the response? How does 2 Samuel end? Then the Lord answered his prayer on behalf of the land and the plague on Israel was stopped.

It's very reminiscent. It's familiar. In chapter 21, where recompense was made to the Gibeonites and the bones of Saul and his family were given a proper burial and God was satisfied that atonement had been made.

Chapter 21, verse 14 ended with these words. After that, God answered prayer on behalf of the land. Same here in verse 25 of chapter 24. Can you see what's going on here?

Sin is being properly dealt with. It's not just the end of punishment. It's the dealing with guilt. It's not just that sin is covered but sin is actually paid for.

And if you were here a couple of weeks ago, we wrestled with this, didn't we? The bloody and messy way though it may be, that is the way for God to forgive sinners without relinquishing his justice.

[18:36] If he were simply to wave sin away and withhold punishment, he would not be just but he simply, but if he simply punished sin and gave people what they deserved, he would not be merciful.

But he is both, isn't he? He is both just and he's merciful. And so there has to be found a way for sin to meet with justice. And so forgiveness is bestowed on his people.

Atonement is the Bible's word for how that happens. And we see an example of that here. The whole of the sacrificial system taught the Israelites that. The whole of the Old Testament system in moments like this was pointing forward to a greater sacrifice of atonement that would remove guilt from people once and for all.

And so that is 2 Samuel 24. And so I hope while you can see, somebody might say, well it's really anticlimactic, isn't it?

It's not what you would expect. Why does the author of 2 Samuel choose to end his story of David's life with this? And let me offer a couple of thoughts as we conclude.

[19:46] The author of 2 Samuel could have written the end of his book as a list of David's military victories. He could have written chapter 24 as a catalogue of David's wealth and blessing.

He could have reminded us of the more heroic moments. He could have reminded us of the way that David trusted God against the odds. But would those have captured the essence of David's life?

That chapter, if it had written in one of those ways, it would have been a really good highlights reel. You know? But it might not have told the truest story. Instead, what we do have here in chapter 24 tells a very true story about the life of King David.

And so I want to suggest to you that chapter 24 really does capture in many ways the essence of David's life. Because it is a story, isn't it?

Chapter 24 of foolish sin. Foolish sin hemmed in by God's mercy. And I reckon that captures the heart of David's reign perfectly.

[21 : 09] after all, this is not the first time, is it, that we've read of David's recorded sins. This is not the first time we've read of David being foolish.

We've heard of David's mistakes many times now, which have been very serious. And nor is this the first time that we've heard of God's justice making right David's wrongs.

God's grace. It's not the first time we've seen God show mercy to the king and to the people that he ruled. This is the story of David's reign, foolish sin, being hemmed in and overcome by the merciful justice of God.

God. And I'm pretty convinced that one of the reasons the Bible tells us the story of David this way, and many other people's story in the Bible like it, is because it's not unique to David at all.

And I think a story like this engages us because we recognize it's familiar to us. It's familiar to me. And that's why 2 Samuel 24 is not really the end of the story at all.

[22 : 25] It's a story that continues. It continues to be told in my life and I suspect in yours too. It's a story of foolish sin, foolish sin being hemmed in and overcome by the merciful justice of God.

Because David is not the only foolish sinner, is he? Sadly, I for one am like him. There have been plenty of moments in my life, as there have been in your life, when something I desire seems very good to me and I pursue it even though I know it is wrong.

There are plenty of times when I've slapped myself on the back for things God has achieved. There are plenty of occasions when I look for confidence in myself or the people around me and I fail to trust God and find my assurance in him alone.

sin. And it's true that I've never taken a census. We can't even count how many come on a Sunday morning. But the root of David's sin can be found in my heart just as well as yours.

I'm foolish frustratingly often. I sin greatly and yet I too have learnt that God is great in mercy.

[24 : 03] David's experience of God is punctuated isn't it with several moments of mercy just in this chapter. Let me show you. Remember the three options that God gave him to choose from.

That's merciful. God gives him the shortest punishment of the three. That is merciful. God holds back the angel of death from Jerusalem.

That is merciful. God provides a means of atonement. Merciful. Ultimately God accepts David's sacrifice. Merciful.

They are all acts aren't they of God's mercy. And this chapter is littered with them like David's life is littered with them. And you multiply this chapter by the years of David's life and it's a lot of mercy.

My sins they are many. His mercy is more. And so it's no wonder that he comes to verse 14. Just look at verse 14 again.

[25 : 11] His mercy is great. No wonder he's learned to count on that. And have we not to? And if we don't count on God's mercy in the way that David did, should we not?

Are not our lives punctuated with mercy as David's was in ways that we can see and in many ways that we cannot see? Do we not know even more of God's mercy than David did?

Have we not come to know the one who like the good shepherd have we not come have we not come to know the Lord's punishment that we might be spared?

Have we not seen a sacrifice of atonement now that has been offered that preserves God's justice and yet swallows up our guilt? Have we not come to know a forgiveness that changes us and keeps on changing us?

are not our lives stories of foolish sin foolish sin hemmed in and overcome by the merciful justice of God?

[26 : 31] When Mary the mother of Jesus praises God for the news of her pregnancy it's famous isn't it? Luke chapter 1 her famous song and here's how it's recorded for us it includes this verse it's a great reminder to us of this continuing story Luke chapter 1 verse 50 and his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation in Ephesians chapter 2 the apostle Paul he writes doesn't he there because of his great love for us because of his great love for us with which he loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins made us alive together with grace by grace you have been saved he is rich in mercy and I think 2 Samuel 24 actually tells the story of David's life perfectly and tells the story of my life too and I pray children and young people it will be the story of your life too it is the story of foolish sin foolish sin hemmed in and overcome by the merciful justice of God it is the story that is known and lived out by all who come to

Jesus forgiveness and live their lives following him it's a story that won't end until we have come to Christ and are gathered round his throne the good shepherd singing his praises and then the song

won't end at all and when that day comes we who belong to Christ we will stand there with King David just like we'll stand with men and women and boys and girls from every generation and we'll have David's words from this chapter on our lips 2 Samuel 24 verse 14 let us fall into the hands of the Lord for his mercy is great let us fall into the hands of the Lord for his mercy is great let's pray