

The Weight of the Crown

2 Samuel 24

Mark Vroegop

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." And when David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, "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.'" 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." 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." 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. 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. 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 Sam. 24:10-17).

We arrive today at the final chapter of 2 Samuel, and our series entitled *The Weight of the Crown*. Our journey began in January of this year, and this is the thirtieth message in our study of this important and historic book.

Next week I'll conclude the series in 1 & 2 Samuel with an overarching summary of the entire book. We'll review the major themes and consider some of the most important applications from our study.

Today we are in 2 Samuel 24, the final chapter, and it's an interesting way to end this book. At first reading it seems odd that the narrator concludes with a story about an ill-advised census and the judgment of God. 1 & 2 Samuel doesn't seem to end with a sunset, David's greatest hits, or "they lived happily ever after." At least that's what I thought until I started digging into this text. I hope to show you not only what this text is recording but also the message behind it.

If you stay with me, you might even find yourself saying (like I did), "Wow! That's an ending!" This narrative contains three sections: (1) resting, (2) judgment, and (3) mercy. I'm going to save the main point of the text until the end, but maybe you can discover it or predict it before we get there.

Testing

Do you remember where we are in David's life? He's survived the coup attempt from Absalom, and he's been reestablished as the rightful king of Israel. Chapter 24 leads with yet another crisis. Verse 1 says that God was angry with Israel, and that he incited David to conduct a census. We're not told the backstory here. Apparently, there's something in the nation that is displeasing to God, and it warrants this kind of testing. The narrator just jumps into this account.

However, there is a parallel record in 1 Chronicles that is worth considering: "Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel" (1 Chron. 21:1). So, 1 Chronicles says Satan incited David, and 2 Samuel 24 says God incited David. Which is it?

I want to acknowledge the tension of this question. We have to recognize that the Bible clearly tells us that God tempts no one: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one" (James 1:13). At the same time, God is sovereign over everything, including the evil in the world. Job testified to his wife saying, "'Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not also receive evil?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (Job 2:10). It was his will for Jesus to suffer: "... this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). And God sets limits on our temptations so that we can bear up under them and resist: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

A way to hold this tension is to recognize that the New Testament uses one Greek word that can mean "test" or "temptation," depending on the context. God tests/trains, but he doesn't tempt. He allows and permits the Devil to tempt for the purpose of testing and training. I think that's what is going on here.

The test involves a census of Israel and Judah. Now, there were times in the history of Israel where conducting a census was commanded and viewed favorably (see Num. 1:2-3). But this is different. We know this because Joab questions the wisdom and necessity of doing it. Joab doesn't have the greatest moral compass, and even he doesn't think this is a good idea.

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?" (2 Sam. 24:3).

The narrator doesn't tell us about David's motives. We're left to guess or infer. One clue is found in Exodus 30:12 where a census of the people was commanded, but it was to be accompanied with an offering (a ransom) to the Lord for the tabernacle. It seems similar to the problem of the ark of the covenant on a cart in 2 Samuel 6. David is falling into self-sufficiency, pride, or a lack of trust in God. He's taking shortcuts. Perhaps the experience of a coup from his own son caused him to start looking over his shoulder, and he wanted to know the distribution of power and people across the nation. Whatever it is,

we know it was wrong, and we also know that the narrator doesn't find it necessary to tell us specifically.

David doesn't listen to Joab's caution: "The king's word prevailed against Joab . . ." (v. 4). Verses 5-8 tell us about the route of their census and that it took nine months and twenty days. Joab informs David of the result: 800,000 valiant men in Israel and 500,000 valiant men in Judah. It's quite a fighting force. But everything changes in the next verse.

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 Sam. 24:10).

Something about the numbers awakens conviction in David's heart. He recognizes that he has acted foolishly and sinned greatly. David failed the test. There was something about this census that dishonored the Lord, and David knew it. He confessed his sin to the Lord and pleaded for mercy.

Judgment

In verse 11, we learn that the Lord sent a prophet named Gad to deliver a message to David. Gad was a part of David's entourage before he was seated as king (see 1 Sam. 22:5). He does not bear good news. God offers David an unusual choice between three kinds of judgment. His options were:

- Three years of famine
- Three months of running from his enemies
- Three days of pestilence in the land

David, as you can imagine, was in great distress (v. 14). But David chose the option that was dependent on the actions of the Lord. His statement is important: "Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man." Remember this sentence, especially "for his mercy is great." We'll see this again.

The effect is the death of 70,000 men from Dan to Beersheba (north to the south). And the narrator describes a frightening scene of a death angel bringing about destruction. It's only because of the mercy of God that the plague doesn't go further and into the city of Jerusalem. We're even told where the angel stopped: at the threshing floor of a man named Araunah.

David sees the angel, and he pleads with the Lord for mercy:

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 Sam. 24:17).

He asks for God to be merciful to the people of Israel ("these sheep"). He even invites the redirection of God's fury on himself. David's appeal worked, and the plague judgment was stopped.

Although the picture isn't perfect, we see an interesting parallel of another true King who offers himself to spare the sheep from the wrath of God. Jesus didn't offer animal sacrifices upon an altar but offered himself on a cross to satisfy the punishment for sin:

... he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12).

Mercy

Remember, we're coming to the end of this book! There's something here for us to learn. What is it?

The prophet Gad returns to David with another message from the Lord. It's in response to David's request for mercy and the ending of the plague. In verse 18, Gad tells David to go to the threshing floor where the plague stopped and to build an altar there. David is to offer sacrifices at this place where the plague has stopped.

In verse 20, Araunah sees the king and his servants approaching. He meets the king, bows before him, and inquires as to what is happening. We read David's response in verse 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" (2 Sam. 24:21).

David offers to buy the threshing floor from Araunah. At first, Araunah suggests that he could just give the threshing floor to David, along with all the other materials needed for sacrifice.

"All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king. And Araunah said to the king, "May the LORD your God accept you" (2 Sam. 24:23).

But David refuses to accept the gift. He says:

"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 (2 Sam. 24:24).

David refuses to offer a sacrifice that costs him nothing personally. As king, he certainly could have accepted this man's generosity. There are many logical paths to get there. But at the end of the book, we get a picture of a humble, thoughtful, and wise king.

David's final action as king in 1 & 2 Samuel is to obey God, purchase the threshing floor, and offer sacrifices there. This book ends not with a successful narrative about David's reign. Rather, it brings the story arc of this book to a conclusion. 1 & 2 Samuel end with yet another failure on the part of David, and it shows us, yet again, the mercy and grace of God.

Kings come and go. Kingdoms rise and fall. There were good and godly priests. There were passive, wicked ones. There were bad kings and good kings. And the story of Israel will show this cycle happening over and over. It's the Lord and his mercy that remains constant. And sure. And trustworthy.

Samuel is about a gray-zone moment. We'll talk more about this next week as I review the entire book. But let me remind you about this thematic thread woven through the book. Life is always complicated, but there are times when it becomes complex—even unpredictable:

“Gray zones exist in the overlap of two eras. They contain the influence of both the passing and the forming era; this makes gray zones confusing and contradictory.”¹

Where do we turn in seasons like this? We come back to the mercy and grace of God. As Hannah said in 1 Sam. 2:2, “There is none holy like the LORD: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God.” There's divine mercy at the end of this book.

Why is this the way that 2 Samuel ends? I wrestled with that in my study of this text. It just seems so odd to conclude the book in this manner. But it was when I read the parallel account in 1 Chronicles that it all made sense.

At that time, when David saw that the LORD had answered him at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, he sacrificed there. 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, but David could not go before it to inquire of God, for he was afraid of the sword of the angel of the LORD. Then David said, “Here shall be the house of the LORD God and here the altar of burnt offering for Israel” (1 Chron. 21:28–22:1).

The place where the plague stopped and the threshing floor that David purchased would become the location of the temple!

The stories of Hannah, Samuel, Saul, and David all conclude at the location where God will meet his people and where atonement for sin will be offered. The place of judgment will become the place of mercy.

And so, this book ends with hopeful mercy. It concludes with grace.

The highs and lows, successes and failures, blessings and testings, good leaders and bad leaders, times of peace and times of conflict, seasons of simplicity and seasons of complexity are undergirded by something more foundational and more important: the mercy of God.

What patience would wait as we constantly roam
What Father, so tender, is calling us home

¹ Mark Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing and Complex World Will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers: 2022), 23.

He welcomes the weakest, the vilest, the poor
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more

Praise the Lord, His mercy is more
Stronger than darkness, new every morn
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more ²

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² <https://www.mattpapa.com/songs/his-mercy-is-more>