**David orders a census** 10/9/23 dkm

Read: 2Samuel 24:1-17, 2Samuel 24:18-25,

Text: 2Samuel 24

Psalms: 103:1-4 &8-14, 51:1-9, 30:4-10, 134a

The closing chapter of this book of 2Samuel records yet another of the sins of King David. As a boy, David trusted in the Lord and he continued to trust in the Lord all his life. As the king of Israel, David usually prayed before going to fight the enemies of God’s people, and God gave him victory after victory. But like every man, David faced temptation and trials, and at times temptation led to sin. We have seen his life and his leadership fall apart when he committed adultery and tried to cover this up by killing Uriah the Hittite, a name that came up again at the end of the previous chapter.

David’s sin here is this chapter is not exactly clear but it is certainly regarded as serious by the Lord. His adultery led to God striking his son, and many other consequences of course, but this sin led to the Lord striking seventy thousand people (24:15). There are three clear divisions in this chapter: ‘Census of Israel and Judah’, ‘Choice of divine punishment’ and, ‘Construction of altar and sacrifice’.

**1. Census of Israel and Judah**

In the first of these four closing chapters of 2Samuel, the Lord sent a famine upon the land because King Saul had broken a vow made to the Gibeonites. The natural disaster was more than ‘natural’; it was a message from the Lord. The Lord accepted David’s act of retribution, and heeded prayer for the land- and so ended the disaster. Chapter 24 begins with the word ‘again’, which presumably refers back to chapter 21 and that disaster, although there is no explicit reference to the Lord being angry at that time. Here in chapter 24 the Lord is angry but no specific reason is given; all we are told is that the Lord was angry at Israel and moved or incited David against them (24:1). In his anger the Lord moved David to take a census of Israel and Judah that would result in disaster for the nation.

A census was not evil in itself, as seen in Number chapter 1, but in this case it was. In this case it was David ordering the census not the Lord. Was David now trusting in the size of his army rather than trusting in the Lord? This is similar to what happened when the people asked for a king; they wanted to be like other nations, but the Lord did not get angry at that time. He told Samuel to give them a king.

The question as to why David ordered this census is answered in the text, but it is a most perplexing answer: ‘The Lord moved David against them’. But the Lord does not tempt anyone to sin (James 1:13-15). Turning to a parallel passage in 1Chronicles, we read that it was Satan who moved David to number Israel (1Chron 21:1). As the adversary, Satan is always tempting God’s people- look at Adam and Eve- and so we understand this reference to Satan moving David to sin but our text says, or implies, that the Lord moved or incited David! If we turn to the book of Job we see interaction between God and Satan in the ‘heavenly court’, and the disasters and suffering that came upon Job. Job saw his affliction as being the hand of God upon him because he was not privy to this ‘heavenly court’. While the inciting of David is not exactly the same as the affliction of Job, there is a parallel in as much as man does not see into the ‘heavenly court’. God is sovereign over all things and all other beings on earth and in heaven. Moreover, God’s ways are higher than our ways (Isa 55:9) and his purposes stretch into eternity.

Having been ‘supernaturally’ moved to take this census, David told Joab, the commander of the army, to go through all the tribes of Israel counting the number of people, that is the number of fighting men (24:2,9). Joab would have been unaware of David being supernaturally moved to take a census. He probably thought David was doing this out of pride. Would David boast to his neighbours of the size of his army, as Hezekiah boasted of his treasures? (Isa 39).

Joab seems to understand that this census was not necessary and would actually anger the Lord. He urged David to trust in the Lord who could add men as he wished; he could also take men away! Gideon’s experience of the Lord determining the size of his army is noteworthy.

Joab was a powerful general, but in this case the king’s word prevailed. So Joab and his officers went off to count the people of Israel. They went across the Jordan and up north towards Dan. They then went south, all the way to Beersheba. It took these army officers over nine months to complete what was seemingly an administrator’s task. If they had been called to fight the Philistines in the meantime it would have taken much longer. Joab brought David his report: eight hundred thousand in Israel and five hundred thousand in Judah who could be called upon to fight. David had a standing army, as well as a bodyguard of mercenaries, but most soldiers were what we call reservists.

As soon as the census results were given to David he was overcome with guilt. Satan and sin always promise more than they deliver. David’s lust for Bathsheba led to momentary pleasure but ongoing guilt. Despite the advice of Joab, David insisted on conducting this census, but then felt guilty for what he had done. He had not prayed about it, and seemingly acted out of pride and self-glory. But guilt lead to prayer and repentance, with David confessing to the Lord that he had acted foolishly and committed a great sin (24:10). He did not try to cover up this sin or minimise it. As pointed out, taking a census was not in itself a sin but in this case it was a ‘weighty’ sin, as David admits.

The next day David was visited by the prophet Gad. Gad brought a word from the Lord. Just as David’s heart condemned him, now he hears words of condemnation from the Lord. It is interesting that the Lord gives David a choice of punishments, not unlike his own offer to the Gibeonites of choosing what they wanted from Israel by way of atonement (21:3). The Lord told David to choose from: three years of famine in the land, three months of running from enemies, or three days of a deadly plague (24:13). Any of these would involve suffering and death in the land. David will later call for the Lord to punish him and not the people, although back in verse 1 we read that the Lord’s anger was against Israel; it was now against David of course!

David’s choice of punishment is interesting because of the reason he gives. He knew the Lord to be merciful, more merciful than man (24:14). Enemy soldiers did not show mercy when they killed. Man’s inhumanity to man was seen in David’s day and continues unimpeded today. Remember the brutality threatened by Nahash the Ammonite that led to Saul rising up to defend the people of Jabesh Gilead; he was going to poke out the right eye of everyone in the city (1Sam 11:1). Remember also the actual brutality of the Japanese in WW2, and of Putin today.

Dying from famine would be a slow death, so David chose three days of plague. Whatever disease this was, it was sudden and fatal. Even before this short time was over, seventy thousand of the men who David had just counted were dead. Boasting in riches or possessions often comes at a cost, namely the Lord removing these riches or possessions in a disaster of some kind. Remember the warning of Jesus in Matthew 6:19 about rust and moths destroying treasure and thieves stealing such things. If David was boasting of the size of his army it was now reduced in size by five percent.

David was right to choose on the basis of the Lord being merciful because when the ‘destroying’ angel stretched his hand over Jerusalem the Lord was grieved at the destruction and said, ‘Enough! Withdraw your hand’ (24:16). And so the plague stopped at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. It seems that David was at this place or nearby because he saw the ‘destroying’ angel and cried to the Lord.

Guilt and grief overcame David as he saw men dying because of his sin. He cried to the Lord to punish him and not the people, the ‘sheep’ the Lord had put under his care (24:17). It may have been in answer to David’s prayer of humility and indeed self-sacrifice that the Lord relented for the destruction he had ordained. Moreover, ‘In David’s willingness to suffer in place of his sheep we catch a glimpse of the greater shepherd- king to come (Mat 2:6, 25:32-34) who would lay down his life for his sheep’.

**3. Construction of altar for a sacrifice**

The prophet again spoke to David saying, ‘Go up and build an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite’ (24:18). This site was significant as the place where the terrible plague stopped. It also became the site where Solomon built the temple, as indicated in 1Chronicles 22:1; some scholars see this whole account in the context of the building of the temple but there is nothing in the text before us connecting it to the building of the temple. David was told by the prophet to build an altar to the Lord at the place where this terrible plague was stopped. The death toll of seventy thousand was greater than in Israel’s war with the Philistines (1Sam 4:10 =30,000) and their civil war (18:7 =20,000); did David make the right choice?

The owner of this threshing floor was surprised to see the king of Israel coming but welcomed him appropriately. David explained that he wanted to buy this man’s threshing floor for the purpose of constructing an altar to the Lord (24:21). Araunah offered to give David the land, as well as his oxen and implements, but David said he must buy it for a price (24:22-24). It was not uncommon in those days to build an altar to the Lord at a site of significance (Gen 12:8, 28:18, Judges 6:26, 1Sam 7:17). We do not offer blood sacrifices today so do not build altars. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord did away with such worship. Nor do we pour holy oil or water over images in a ritual not commanded in the Bible.

David lived a thousand years before Christ, and he was actually told by the prophet of God to build this altar and offer burnt offering and peace offerings. In a burnt offering the animal was completely consumed by way of atonement for unintentional sin, while a peace offering was an expression of thanksgiving or worship. While we read of this altar being built, ‘That the plague may be withdrawn’ (24:21), the plague had already been stopped (24:16). This altar and the sacrifice were by way of atonement and thanksgiving or worship, as commanded by the Lord.

If you find this action of David, and the Lord’s heavy hand of punishment upon the land hard to understand, we close with a lesson that is easy to understand. Araunah wanted to give David his land but David insisted on buying it because, as he said, ‘I will not offer… to the Lord my God that which cost me nothing’ (24:24). If you want to put money you find on the footpath into the collection by all means do so, but do not hold back the offering from your pay-packet. Besides, do not bring any winnings from gambling! In India the collection plate was often filled with dirty and torn currency notes that were refused in shops. Our offering to the Lord should be the first part taken from our pay-packet not the last. The apostle Paul praised the poorest of Christians who were giving liberally or generously to the work of the Lord (2Cor 8:2).

If David would not give to the Lord that which cost him nothing neither should we. Rather, recognising the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who, ‘though he was rich yet for your sakes became poor’, let our giving be a sacrifice of money, as well as time and labour, to the Lord.