

2 Samuel 24 — David's Numbering of Israel

Two Viewpoints of the Same Act, God's Government, the Threshing Floor, and the Place of the Altar

Scripture Reading: 2 Samuel 24:1–25

“And again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah.

“And David said unto Gad, I am in a great strait: let us fall now into the hand of the LORD; for his mercies are great: and let me not fall into the hand of man.”

“And David said unto the LORD when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said, Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house.”

“And David built there an altar unto the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the LORD was intreated for the land, and the plague was stayed from Israel.”

Two Viewpoints of One Act

One of the most instructive features of this chapter is the comparison with its parallel in 1 Chronicles 21. Second Samuel 24:1 says the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel and he moved David to number them. First Chronicles 21:1 says Satan stood up against Israel and provoked David to number Israel. The same act, the same David, the same numbering — and two utterly different descriptions of what lay behind it.

The comparison illuminates what happened in the book of Job. Who did those things to Job? Traced all the way back to its source, God did it. He permitted it; the hand of God was where it all started. And yet traced from another viewpoint, Satan did it, because Satan brought all those troubles upon Job — and in every case God allowed Satan to do so much and no more. Both statements are true; they are viewing the same event from entirely different standpoints. Night and day as perspectives, yet both accurate.

The reason for the anger of the Lord against Israel is not spelled out in the chapter. The general consideration is that David was near the end of his life, had repeatedly defeated the Philistines, had increased the borders of Israel, had gold and brass and silver in abundance collected for the temple. Everything appeared to be in order. The previous chapter had described the mighty men in their gradations and organization. It may be that the prosperity of Israel in general had lifted up the heart in pride, and this comes out in the numbering. The flesh in David wanted to know how great his domain was. It is at least consistent with the account.

Joab's Warning: Two Ways of Seeing the Same Project

Joab warned David against the numbering, and his warning is itself illuminating. Verse 3 in 2 Samuel has Joab saying the king delights in this thing and questioning why he should. First Chronicles 21:3 has Joab saying, why should he be a trespass to Israel? The same Joab said both things, and both are in the record. But note the difference in what each reveals. In 2 Samuel, the flesh in Joab recognizes the flesh in David: the flesh answers the flesh, face answers to face in water, so the heart of man to man — and Joab could see that the king had some delight in the project.

In 1 Chronicles, the viewpoint shifts to what it would mean for Israel: not merely that David had a delight in it, but that he himself would become a trespass to

Israel. Not that he would commit a trespass, but that he would become one. That is a much more serious thing and puts the whole project in an entirely different light. Projects can be dangerous. The man who rebuilt Jericho had a project, and kept plowing through it at the cost of his firstborn and his lastborn. He chose his project over his family. David's project was an exercise in futility that cost the lives of seventy thousand of the people he was counting.

The Choice: Let Us Fall into the Hand of the LORD

God gave David three choices: seven years of famine, three months fleeing before enemies, or three days of pestilence. The three days of pestilence was the only one that was not falling into the hand of man. Famine is not the hand of man, and neither is pestilence; but fleeing before enemies would have been. So when David said, "Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercies are great; and let me not fall into the hand of man," he was not simply choosing one of the three. He was declining one and leaving the choice between the remaining two to God. That was a morally beautiful thing. He put the decision into God's hands rather than specifying which of the two remaining things God should do.

There was no Joseph this time. When seven years of famine came upon Egypt in Genesis, God had sent Joseph in advance, stored up for seven years. At the time of 2 Samuel 24, there was no Joseph. God chose the pestilence. It went from morning until the set time — it stopped on the clock in a way that no epidemic or plague in ordinary medical experience ever does. The hand of God was on it entirely.

Joab's Omission, the Numbers, and the Completeness of Seventy Thousand

First Chronicles 21:6 notes that Joab did not count Levi or Benjamin, for the king's word was abomination to him — so he did not complete the counting.

This disobedience is not the point of the story in 2 Samuel, but it certainly is noted in Chronicles. The difference in the totals between the two accounts (2 Samuel gives 800,000 and 500,000; Chronicles gives 1,100,000 and 470,000) is at least partly explained by the presence of the word valiant in 2 Samuel: valiant men that drew sword. A large army with many cowards is not the same as a smaller army of men who will actually fight. Israel found this out under Gideon, who sent the cowards home and was left with three hundred who could not be too many.

The seventy thousand who died in the pestilence cannot be subtracted from the totals, because the whole exercise was futile. The numbers were never complete. Levi was not counted. Benjamin was not counted. What remained was not a reliable census but a monument to an act of pride that brought God's government upon the whole nation. Yet in that seventy thousand there is a precision: it is as if a complete company was removed, an exact measure on God's part, neither more nor less than what the purpose of his government required.

These Sheep, What Have They Done? From King to Shepherd

David's confession is striking in its progression. In verse 10, when his heart smote him, he said to the Lord: "I have sinned greatly in what I have done." He confessed and condemned himself. But by verse 17, when he saw the angel stretched over Jerusalem, something had deepened: "Behold, it is I that have sinned, and it is I that have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done?" He no longer refers to the people as the people. He calls them sheep.

There is a difference between a king and a king with a shepherd's heart. The threshing that God's government had worked upon David had separated something — the chaff was being cleaned out, and what was underneath was the shepherd's heart that cared for the sheep. These sheep, what have they done? Let thy hand be against me and against my father's house. He interposed himself

between the people and the judgment. That is the heart of a shepherd.

The Threshing Floor: God's Choice of a Place

The command to go and build an altar at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite was not an arbitrary designation. It was the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 16 and 12, where God had said he would choose the place where he would put his name. Who would have thought, reading those passages in Deuteronomy, that God would use his governmental dealings with Israel in this way as the instrumentality to mark out that choice? Yet that is exactly what happened. First Chronicles 22:1 records David's recognition: "This is the house of the LORD God, and this is the altar of the burnt offering for Israel."

David insisted on paying for everything. He would not offer to the Lord his God that which cost him nothing. Then burnt offerings and peace offerings were offered. The burnt offering speaks of acceptance: the offerer laying his hands on it, identifying himself with Christ as the ground of acceptance before God. The peace offering speaks of communion: not buying peace with God but expressing from a free heart the communion that already exists. The conclusion of the whole chapter is David at peace with God, the plague stayed, the land entreated for. God's government had produced a better king, a more tender heart, the shepherd's identification with his sheep — and had marked out the place where the altar of burnt offering for Israel would stand forever.

Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercies are great.