

Let Us Fall into the Hand of the Lord

2 Samuel 24

We have now come to the end of the books of 1-2 Samuel, the story of Israel's transition from the chaotic period of the judges to a united kingdom, first under Saul, and then under David. We have followed the story of David's rise to the throne of Israel, as well as all the ups and downs of his reign as king. Here at the end of the book, I have mentioned several times before that what we have in chapters 21-24 is a chiasm:

- A. David ends a famine by atoning for Saul's sin, 21:1-14
- B. David's giant-slaying men, 21:15-22
- C. David's song of deliverance, 22:1-21
- C.' David's last words, 23:1-7
- B.' David's mighty men, 23:8-39
- A.' David ends a plague by atoning for his own sin, 24:1-25

As you can see, chapter 24 is parallel to the story in 21:1-14, which was the story about a famine over the land of Israel owing to Saul's breaking of Israel's covenant with the Gibeonites. That famine was not lifted until David handed over seven of Saul's descendants to the Gibeonites, who executed them by hanging. When I preached on that story, I entitled the message "Glorious Truth from a Troubling Text." Here in a similar story we have, yet again, a troubling text.

On a surface level reading, you might come away from this story wondering what kind of God this is. What kind of God would incite his servant David to sin and then punish the whole nation for it, killing 70,000 people? What kind of God would then demand from David a bloody sacrifice to atone for that sin, which he himself apparently caused in the first place? You might get the impression that the God of Israel is very similar to the pagan gods of the nations: erratic, impulsive, bad-tempered, and bloodthirsty. He appears to be the kind of God you can't really trust, but whom you "work the system" to placate enough to keep off your back, similar to a mafia boss who will let you live in peace so long as you pay him off regularly (by the way, that's also true of the IRS).

Some who call themselves Christians would even say that what we have in a passage like this one (and throughout the Old Testament) is a view of God that is false and must be corrected by Jesus. For it is in Jesus that we come to see that God is not like 2 Samuel 24 at all, but rather he is a God of love. Through the teachings of Jesus, so they say, we come to see that God does not need a bloody sacrifice, that our sins are not really as offensive to him as we once thought, and that because he is love, he accepts us as we are. And in this manner the door is kicked open to the redefinition of all moral categories, the renaming of good as evil and evil as good.

But if we make that move, not only do we unravel the unity of Scripture, not only do we mischaracterize the teachings of Jesus, not only do we attempt to strip God of his own holiness, but we also profoundly misunderstand Old Testament passages like this one. For the truth is, this story does not present God as an erratic, ill-tempered mafia boss who needs to be placated to keep off your back. It presents him as a God of profound love, faithfulness, and holiness. It presents him as a God who is ever true to his covenant made with David, and a God whom we can trust to forgive our sins while remaining always true to himself. Dig deeper into this text, and you will have a window into the very heart of God that, if you understand rightly, should leave you in awe of his love for you. My plan is to walk through the three sections of this story with you and reflect on what it teaches us about the heart of God and the house of David.

In the opening section of the story that sets up the major conflict, we read about

1. An arrogant king and a foolish act (vv. 1-9)

Right from the start, we have several knots to untie. The first knot comes from verse 1: “Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.” What does “again” mean here? It seems to point us back to chapter 21, where the Lord inflicted Israel with a famine because of Saul’s faithlessness to the Gibeonites. A new situation has arisen that places Israel under the same kind of threat.

The second knot is in the rest of verse 1: “Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah.’” Why would God incite David to a sinful act? According to the text, “the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.” We are not told why, but we can assume it was because of some sin on the part of the nation as a whole. My best guess is that this event took place after the rebellion of Absalom against his father David. Many people from both Israel and Judah participated in that act of rebellion against the Lord and against his anointed one, and so the Lord’s anger was kindled against the whole nation. Therefore, the Lord incited David to an act of sin that would become the concrete occasion for an act of judgment against the whole nation.

But no sooner do we have that knot untied that we come up against a more difficult one: how can it be that God would incite David to sin? God is absolutely holy in character, and James 1:13 tells us that God tempts no one to evil. To make matters even more complicated, this same story is told in 1 Chronicles 21, and in that account the story begins by saying, “Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.” What the author of 2 Samuel attributes to God, the author of 1 Chronicles attributes to Satan. Is this a hopeless contradiction? No, actually, it is the clue that unties the knot for us. God is holy, and so he is never the direct agent of temptation. But he is sovereign over Satan. As Luther said, the devil is God’s devil. So the Lord, in his sovereignty, permitted Satan to incite David toward a sinful act. Knowing David’s heart and the remaining arrogance that was there, the Lord allowed Satan to exploit that and prevail upon David to commit an act of sin that would become the occasion for a demonstrative act of judgment against Israel. So at one level, Satan incited David to sin. But at a higher level, it was all coming to pass according to God’s plan.

But that leaves us with yet another knot to untie: what is wrong with taking a census? Does Scripture anywhere condemn that act as sinful? No, in fact, there were two times in the book of Numbers when God commanded that a census be taken. But we must ask: what is the purpose of

a census in Scripture? The purpose is to prepare for war, and for Israel that meant holy war against the enemies of God. We see a hint of that in this text in verse 9: “And 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.” Because taking a census was such a weighty and solemn act, it was an act regulated by laws in Exodus 30:11-16. God required all men who registered for the census (i.e., those who signed up as soldiers in holy war) to pay a half shekel to the tabernacle. This was a significant sum, probably equal to several hundred dollars today. Why would God require men to pay a kind of tax for the opportunity to serve in the army? It was a way of acknowledging that God owned their lives, and his divine protection over them in holy war was a gift to them, a sovereign granting back to them of their lives that he could justly demand from them. Some have argued that David did not collect the half shekel tax on this census in accord with the law, but I don’t see any evidence of that. I assume that in taking the census, David followed the requirements of Exodus 30.

So then, what was David’s sin here? I think it was in his plan to build up a military force for the purpose of a war that God did not command him to wage. He had no more territory to conquer in the promised land, and he presumably had no pressing external threats at this time from which he needed to defend his kingdom. So by taking a census, David exposed that what was in his heart was a plan to try to extend *his* kingdom by military conquest, to build *his* empire apart from the Lord. It was a bold, arrogant, and defiant act. And even Joab, David’s military commander, a man not known for having a very sensitive conscience, was taken back by it. Joab’s protest against David is registered in verse 3, but as verse 4 tells us, David’s word prevailed, and so Joab and the other commanders went out and worked their way from the territory east of the Jordan counterclockwise all throughout the land, recruiting and registering a massive military force for King David. And in this act we hear an echo of chapter 11, when a younger King David, from his own palace roof, looked lustfully on the wife of one of his loyal servants and assumed he could take her for himself.

At the end of Joab’s work, David has a massive force of 800,000 men of Israel and 500,000 men of Judah ready to fight for him. He has tremendous power, but he has been an arrogant fool who thinks the kingdom he rules belongs to him, and not the Lord. He has recapitulated the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden, the sin of assuming God’s prerogatives for himself. As D.A. Carson has said, all sin is an attempt to de-God God. And that is why sin is never a light matter. When you are tempted to sin, pause and reflect on what it is you are toying with: it is the same arrogance and foolishness we see in David here. It is the assumption that I can do God’s job for him, and his lordship over me is no longer welcome, thank you very much. Viewed for what it really is, sin is irrational, foolish, and completely appalling.

So that brings us to the second part of the story, where the consequences of David’s sin catch up with him. In verses 10-15 we see

2. A repentant heart and an astonishing choice (vv. 10-15)

When we come to verse 10, we reach a turning point: “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.” Although we have seen that same old arrogance in David that we had previously seen in the incident with Bathsheba, it is important to notice how David has changed since then. After the

sin with Bathsheba, David did not repent until he was confronted by Nathan the prophet. Here, David's heart strikes him for his sin before any prophet speaks to him. That is an indication that David's conscience has grown more sensitive to sin, which is one of the most important indicators of spiritual maturity. When you know that you have sinned, does your conscience feel the weight of it? Does it prompt you to repentance? Or have you, by repeated sinful choices, hardened your conscience and made sin feel normal? If the latter, you are in great danger. Take a lesson from David and seek to train your heart by the Word of God to accuse you and not let yourself rest easy with unrepentant sin.

In response to David's repentance, the Lord sent word to him through the prophet Gad to present him with three options. Verse 13 reads, "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.'" Faced with this seemingly impossible choice, we come to David's astonishing statement in verse 14: "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.'" First, let's interpret what that means: David has chosen the pestilence, the form of punishment that would come directly from the Lord and not from men. Even though a famine would also be from the Lord, the nature of a three-year famine would make Israel vulnerable to exploitation or even attacks from other nations. So David wants no men involved at all; he asks God to punish Israel directly.

Let's take a minute to linger over this verse and what it tells us about God. At first glance, David's statement seems to contradict what Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 10:28: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." It sounds like Jesus says we should be more terrified of God than men, whereas David opts to fall into the hand of the Lord rather than the hands of men, knowing that the Lord is merciful. Can both be true? Yes. The point of Jesus' statement in Matthew 10:28 is that you should be terrified of making yourself an enemy of God, so if you are faced with a choice between siding with God and facing the wrath of men or siding with men and facing the wrath of God, you should side with God every time. Becoming God's enemy should terrify you. But David is not making that kind of choice. He is not making himself God's enemy by receiving his judgment. He is being asked to choose the method of judgment that will come upon his kingdom from the God who loves him as a Father loves a son. And in the context of that relationship, David says, "Let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great." In the words of Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad: "David chooses . . . the most severe punishment, pestilence, which was regarded as a visitation coming directly from Jawheh. For the ancient readers this was utterly unexpected, for who in those old days would have chosen a visitation that came directly from the deity rather than a calamity brought about by men? The storyteller shows us a decision of a highly dramatic character. David did what was quite unexpected, but precisely in so doing he flung himself through the thick curtain of divine anger directly on God's heart."¹ After walking with the Lord for many years, David knows without a doubt that the safest place for him to be is in the hand of the Lord.

And so the plague came, and it came with a vengeance. In three short days 70,000 men of Israel died, cutting David's mighty military force down and showing God's power to topple David's

autonomous empire at any time he pleases. At the point of verse 15 we are left wondering if David's choice will pay off, or if it will blow up in his face. But before we move on, let me ask you this question: Do you know the heart of God well enough to face your own sin? Do you have the confidence in the mercy of God that David learned over years of walking with the Lord that when you fall into sin, you don't have to hide from God? You don't have to minimize your sin, downplay it, or attempt to justify yourself. All you have to do is face it honestly and put yourself in the merciful hands of the Lord. There is no safer place to be.

And that brings us to the last part of the story:

3. A merciful God and an atoning sacrifice (vv. 16-25)

The pestilence that David chose has wreaked havoc throughout the kingdom of Israel. But then we come to verse 16: "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." Do you see what happened? David made the right choice. He knew that God is, in the words of Joel 2:12, "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, and he relents over disaster." The God who relents over disaster is the God who, having pledged himself in covenant faithfulness to the house of David, suspended his wrath when his angel came to the city of Jerusalem. When David was presented with an agonizing choice, he pushed all his chips to the middle of the table and said, "I place my bet on the merciful heart of God." And he won.

But the story doesn't end there. God's wrath has been suspended, but David's sin has not yet been atoned for. So David intercedes for the people in verse 17, asking that the blame fall upon himself and his father's house. But instead of bringing down his wrath upon David, the Lord sent another word to him through the prophet Gad. Verse 18 says, "And Gad came that day to David and said to him, 'Go up, raise an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.'" The Jebusites were the former inhabitants of Jerusalem before David conquered it. Araunah was apparently a man of some prominence, possibly even a royal figure of the Jebusites. And in obedience to the Lord's command, David went up to Araunah's house to offer to buy his threshing floor. Araunah was probably terrified to see the king of Israel and his attendants coming to his house, not knowing what David's intention was, and that may explain why Araunah was willing to hand over whatever David asked for. But David refused to take a handout, knowing that a genuine sacrifice had to cost something, so he paid Araunah fifty shekels of silver for the threshing floor and his oxen. And then verse 25 concludes the story: "And David built there an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the Lord responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel." The Lord had previously suspended his wrath by pausing the plague when his angel came to Jerusalem. But now in response to this sacrifice of atonement, he turned his wrath away completely.

Yes, God demanded a bloody sacrifice, but we are not dealing here with a bad-tempered pagan deity, a kind of mafia boss who must be paid off. We have in this story a God who is holy and merciful. In his holiness he remains true to himself and does not allow the arrogant sin of David to go unanswered. But in answering David's sin, he suspends his wrath and then provides a means of atonement to turn it away completely. But let's come back now to one final knot from this story that I have not yet untied: If the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel for

something they had already done, presumably their part in Absalom's rebellion, then why did God even need to permit Satan to incite David to this sin to provide an occasion for judgment? If God wanted to judge Israel, why not just judge them directly? A brother in our congregation, after reading this story with his family earlier this week, came to bounce an idea off me that I thought was right on the money. He said that it seemed like God was inciting David's sin so that when the judgment came there would be a mediator to stop the destruction. God could have judged them without involving David at all, but he planned his judgment in such a way that King David would be able to make atonement for them and end it. In other words, God even planned his judgment with his mercy in view. That is the heart of our God.

Some years later, David's son Solomon, during his reign as king, built the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. In 2 Chronicles 3:1, we read, "Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to David his father, at the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite." David's altar on Mount Moriah would later become Solomon's temple. Even more interesting, in Genesis 22:2, the Lord had said to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." Mount Moriah, the very place where Abraham passed the test of his faith in offering up his son Isaac, was the same place where David built an altar to turn away the wrath of God, which was the same place where Solomon later built a temple to become the meeting place between God and Israel. And all these reverberations of grace collectively point us to the one who is the true sacrifice, the true meeting place between God and men, the one who said of his own body, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). It is in Jesus Christ the greater Son of David, crucified and risen for us, that we see the merciful heart of God on full display, the heart that would in no way compromise with sin, and yet openly embraces us who are sinners. Jesus Christ did not come to correct the vision of God we see in 2 Samuel 24. He came to fulfill it.

In the face of the wretchedness of our sin, let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for it is a nail-scarred hand that will hold us in his love. We have nowhere else to fall. Amen.

¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, quoted in Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 146.