

14–“Still Searching for a King” // 2 Samuel 24 // *The Search for a King*

In the Bible, David’s life has 2 endings: (just like many of my sermons)

- This one here in 2 Samuel, and another at the end of 1 Chronicles.
- Not 2 contradictory endings, just each writer chooses a different event to summarize/conclude the life of David. I couldn’t figure out which one I wanted to do... hard decisions stress me out, so I’m going to just do them both. One this week, and the final message in this series next week.
- I debating skipping this passage, because, frankly, it has a lot of things in it that are difficult to interpret... but I decided not to, because a lot of times when people ask me questions about the Bible, its about stuff like what we’re about to read in this chapter. For a lot of people, it’s passages like this one that makes them say, “How could the Bible possibly be a book from God with stuff like that in it?” So I want to deal with this passage (if nothing else) as an example for how you can approach passages like this one mean... plus, I know that most of you dealt with this in your small groups and maybe some of these questions came up.

So, you ready? 2 Samuel 24 (*get my game face on... this is not for the faint of heart*) [24:1] *Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go, number Israel and Judah.”*

- By that, David meant, “Go and get a count of the men we have in the army and those who are eligible to be drafted in the next few years.”

Well, vs. 3, Joab, the Mancretery, says, Look, ([3] *But Joab said to the king*), “*May the LORD your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are... but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?*”

- He says, “Why are you doing this, David?” He sees this as a senseless census. Joab senses something is wrong with this. See it says David “*delighted*” in this? What’s going on?
- But David says, “Look, mancretery. I’m the king. I make the rules Do it.” And so Joab says, “As you wish, Sire, and gets the numbers back to David.

Jump down to vs. 10: [10] *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.”*

- Now, at this point, many of you ask, “What was wrong with what David did?” I mean, getting a count... Sounds organized. How is that bad?
- I think the key is in that word “*delighted*.” David finds a delight in how strong his army is. There are probably 3 things behind this:
 1. **pride**—he is trying to rejoice in how strong he’s made the institution;
 2. **lack of faith**—he wants to see how well they’re going to be able to defend themselves against their enemies—he’s not trusting promises of God; and God had given Israel explicit instructions that was His job
 3. **aggression**—one of the reasons you figure out how many fighting men you have is because you are thinking about picking a fight,¹
- David should have been he should have been making God’s grace his boast, not his strength; trusting in God’s promises for his protection, not his army; and delighting in God as His treasure, not the potential lands and riches of other nations.

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *Commentary on 2 Samuel*.

- 2 Samuel ends with David repeating the same sin that opened 1 Samuel. If you remember back to when we started this study, Israel wanted a king to replace God as their security and their treasure; David now wants an army to replace God as his security and treasure.
- So, David sinned here because he delighted in the strength of his numbers, not in the grace of God.
- Oh, by the way, did I mention we've had almost 5500 people at church the last few weekends?
 - We get excited about numbers...
 - 16th fastest church. VP Aaron Coe's comment; Jerry Rankin's comment; I want to tell you that stuff to encourage you...
 - But church, we have to be very careful. Everything God has given us has been *grace*. Our security is not in our buildings or budgets; our delight is not in how big we are or what people say about us; we don't rejoice that the demons are subject to us, but that our names are written down in the Lamb's book of life.
 - And let me ask you... This whole thing ought to make you ask, "What do you delight in?" What thought just makes your heart soar a little? How much money you made last year? An award you got? If you look at some trophy, or your house, or your stock portfolio, or how awesome your body looks because of how hard you've worked, and say, "Man, I done good. Ain't I something?" you're in the same place David was.

[11] *And when David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad (Nathan had gone into retirement; the new guy was Gad; Gad, the prophet of God... Gad was from Boston, and that's just how they said God up there... so Gad says...), saying,)* [12] *"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.'"*

- This is like the worst genie experience ever. 3 things... choose 1. I'm going to go with none of the above.

[13]... *"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."*

[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."*

Alright... now, again, passages like this one are precisely what keep some people from believing the OT could possibly be from God—aren't they? Did you see why? There are a number of problems some of you had... and there are probably some more that you didn't even notice! So, I'll deal with the ones you saw and maybe some you didn't, too. (I'll see your objections, and raise you a few...). I saw 5 "stumbling blocks" in this passage:

1. "Who incited David to count the fighting men?"

- (2 Samuel 24:1, *Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying "Go, number Israel and Judah."*) 2 Samuel 24 (vs. 1) says *the Lord did*. The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel and *he* incited David.
- But if you look at the parallel account to this one in 1 Chronicles 21:1 it says *"Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel."*
- Uh-oh. Is it Satan or God? That's a pretty bad contradiction, isn't it? When you confuse what Satan says for what God says, that's about as much of a contradiction as you can get! So, see the Bible hopelessly contradicts itself.

- No, that is actually just a misunderstanding of God's sovereignty. The Bible teaches that God sometimes allows us to fall prey to the temptations of Satan. In one sense, God is NOT the one doing it; Satan is the one tempting us, and we're the ones choosing to yield to the temptation. But, in another sense, God is sovereign over that, because God could have stopped it if He wanted. So He allows us to follow our own wicked desires as a part of *His* plan.
- So, both the statements in 1 Chronicles and 2 Samuel are correct. 1 Chronicles correctly says that Satan was behind this temptation, and 2 Samuel correctly acknowledges that God had a sovereign purpose in the whole thing.²
- Nothing, you see, is outside of God's control. He works all things according to His plan. But that doesn't mean He's the one doing those things.
- How He takes our free decisions and even the malicious intentions of Satan and works them for His perfect plan is a mind-boggling mystery, but He does it.
 - **There's a word picture I once heard that may help you begin to get your mind around that, although it quickly breaks down if you press on it: Say you have a river with a really strong current flowing between two river banks.** The molecules and fish are free, in one sense, to move about wherever they want in that river; but, in another, they are all moving to a precise point within a carefully outlined set of boundaries. That's like God's sovereignty and our free choices. We're all freely choosing certain things, but God is moving history and carrying His plan to exactly the place He wants it.
- Now, let me just acknowledge this, and I say this a lot: If you are one of those people who like to have everything figured out in a math formula, there are some things about God like this that might frustrate you, because he doesn't fit into your mental Excel sheet, but then again, we are talking about God. JUST STOP AND THINK ABOUT THAT FOR A MINUTE: If there is a God, the Bible says He is infinite in power and infinite in wisdom.... *Think about this for a minute*, if there is a God, think about how great His power is above yours → He spoke the worlds into existence, and He created the nebulae and the planets and the stars and the complexities of the atom and molecule with just a word! One one strand of DNA there is enough information coded to fill up 500 sets of the Encyclopedia Britannica. You have problems getting your DVD player to work right with your cable box.
- Now, if there is a God, then His wisdom is also infinite, and that means His wisdom is as high above yours as His power is above yours... to the same degree... so, then, does it not make sense that a lot of stuff about Him may not make sense to you?
 - My counsel for you is not to have so much confidence in your own abilities.
 - Quit trying to make God as dumb as you. (That should have been a verse in the Bible. Write that down.)
 - And why don't you come into His presence with less of a strut and more of a bow? That's all I'm saying...

2. ("Is there a discrepancy in the numbers?")

Another thing you notice if you read the 1 Chronicles account is that there is a discrepancy in the number of people counted.

- 2 Samuel 24 says that in the Northern states there were 800K, whereas 1 Chronicles 21 says there were 1.1 million

² Walter Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, "It is also true, according to the Hebrew thinking, that whatever God permits he commits. By allowing census-taking, God is viewed as having brought about the act. The Hebrews were not very concerned with determining secondary causes and properly attributing them to the exact cause. Under the divine providence everything ultimately was attributed to him; why not say he did it in the first place?"

- So, people point to this and say, “Clearly there is a contradiction here. Bible can’t possibly be written by God, because God could count.” Two possible explanations for this:
 - 1 Chronicles 27 says there were 288K in the regular army, so assuming that number is left out of the 800K reported in 2 Sam 24, and you add that to the 800K and round up, that comes to 1.1 million;
- Personal: In college, I got way bent out of shape because of supposed contradictions: I have looked at literally hundreds, they always resolve
 - The other option is a copyist error: the Bible has been copied literally hundreds of times. It is apparent that some copying errors got in there; sometimes they were just phrasing differences; sometimes they have to do with number errors like this.
 - You say, “Well, that totally shakes my confidence in the Bible. Is this not the word of God?” Maybe some monk monk-ed it up according to his agenda. Don’t let it do that. We have thousands of copies from the Bible from all over the world, and the amount of differences are actually pretty small when you consider how many copies there are, and *they don’t amount to any substantive changes that affect the Bible’s message at all.*
 - **Scotland Yard: the titanium rod for the yard.** Evidently how God preserved the Bible.

3. “What was so bad about what David did?”

People read that God sends this big plague in response to David counting the people and feel like at best God is overreacting, because, come on, this just seems like an arbitrary rule anyway.

I’ve got a couple of thoughts for you on this:³

- A. I’m going to give you an explanation for why this is wrong, but at the end of the day it is because God had told him not to. People in our culture have this real pride thing going... I’ll believe your rules, God, if I understand and agree with them.”
 - Listen, if there is a God, He makes the rules, and some of them you may not understand at first.
 - **I have rules my kids don’t understand.** “I know it looks like that little slit in the wall is made for a fork. But No. Don’t put any silverware in there.” “Why Dad?” Because there is an invisible force called “electricity” which is the yield of subatomic particles jumping between orbits that creates an alternating current that, if it enters your body, can’t disrupt your central nervous system and burn your skin.” Ever try that one on your 3 year old? Oh yeah, Dad, I get it now. One day, they’ll understand that. But for now I just say “Don’t touch it.” Why? Because I’m your daddy and I know more than you and I love you. Now, what is greater, the gap between my 3 year old’s understanding and mine, or my understanding and God’s?
 - If you only obey Jesus when He makes sense to you, then He’s not your Lord, He’s your advisor. I’m not telling you to check your brain at the door; I’m telling you that a better question is not “Do I agree with this” but “Did God really say this?” Fair?
 - I mean, if there is a God, and if you believe this is His word, then you should at least have the humility to submit to His Lordship.
- B. Here are the 3 reasons this was wrong: *pride; lack of faith; aggressive militarism.*⁴
 - In fact, some of you will find this helpful. Did you know that almost all of the big judgments in the Old Testament are because of the aggressive violence of a society?
 - Gen 6 says that when God sent the flood it was because the world had grown so violent and every thought of men toward each other was once of violence.

³ See commentary by Dale Ralph Davis on 2 Samuel 24 for both of my points. To note, Exodus 30:11–16 says that a census was allowed. David’s motivations must be in question.

⁴ Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (2002). *Commentary on the Old Testament*. (2 Sa 24). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

- Sodom and Gomorrah: Ezekiel 16:49 says that Sodom and Gomorrah were judged for oppressing, or grinding, the poor.
- God sent Jonah to Nineveh because they were so oppressive and brutal to surrounding nations...
- When God sent the children of Israel into Canaan He said it was because of the Canaanites' brutality, which included infant sacrifices and the constant pillaging of their neighbors. Israel's taking of the Promised Land was a judgment on those nations.
- So, do you see what is happening in 2 Samuel 24? Israel was becoming the very nation God had used them to judge
- In one sense, this is mercy... If they kept on their current course, they would become like Sodom and Gomorrah and God would have to utterly destroy them too! This was an extreme measure which, in some measure, saved them a much more devastating judgment later.
 - **Story: V with Kharis and Allie all day...** Sometimes I get home and I can tell Veronica has had one of those days... I'll sit down at the table and one of my daughters really smarts off at Veronica... I look up and I can see that look in my wife's eye... It's like the red flag in front of the bull, and I pick my little girl up, and take her back to the back room and discipline her for her disrespect. I spank her, because my wife and I are backwards enough to think that still works. That punishment, to my daughter, hurts... it always. But my intention is not to hurt. It's mercy. I have saved my daughter in that moment 2 accounts. #1) By correcting her of her disrespect, I am helping cure her of a fatal heart flaw; #2) I rescued her from a much more severe discipline that would have come from my wife.
- **God's work here is mercy, saving them from where the trajectory of their sin is taking them.**

4. "How is this just?"

David commits the sin, but the people pay...?

- First, it says that God was angry at Israel. Doesn't tell us exactly why he was angry...
 - You can probably assume they had the same issues David did.
 - Plus, they had just participated in this big rebellion against David under Absalom and then another after that one under Sheba. David was God's king, and they had rebelled against that.
- You say, "OK. Yeah, but I'm sure there were some innocent people who died in this plague? Isn't that how plagues work; the innocent get mixed up with guilty? How about the kids who died in the plague, they hadn't done anything wrong..."
 - OK, this is the hardest part of the message, because it gets at the idea of why there is suffering in the world where it seems like the innocent suffer with the guilty.
 - **So, here we go:**
 - We have this assumption: the human race deserves good things, and why do these bad things keep happening to such good people?
 - The Bible takes exactly the opposite approach... the world is under a rightful curse for our rebellion as a race that each of us has participated in, or at least will participate in.
 - Some of the kids who died, and some others, were innocent of this particular sin, but all of us will end up sinning and being a part of the rebellion
 - Now, they may have been swept up in the judgment on this particular sin, but God will not hold them responsible in eternity for a sin they didn't commit. And, from God's perspective, what happens in earth is not nearly as significant as what happens in eternity. Eternity is where justice is really served. You can just kind of look at this like

God collecting them early... after which they'll be judged by God in eternity for only their sin, which is the only judgment that really matters.

- Now, listen: We could never, ever use that philosophy to justify violence against the innocent, because we are not God. For us, only the people who did the crime should get the punishment. But God, who reigns in eternity and sees justice from that dimension, will do things like this and we can't accuse him of injustice.
- One more thing on this before I move on to our 5th issue, David says something that reveals an understanding about God that you and I, when we finally see things clearly, will say, **vs 14 *Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man.***
 - The Bible consistently maintains, in the presence of all of these questions about suffering, that there is no one more loving and merciful than God, and **when we finally see things clearly, what will amaze us is not God's judgment, but His mercy.**
 - If you had to fall into the hands of men or God to get justice, you would always choose God.
 - *We see God's compassion put on display at the cross, and when we can't understand why He does certain things in other places, we base our understanding of His character on the cross.* At the cross is where the truly innocent One suffered, and He was suffering for our sin, voluntarily, so that we could have life. When I can't understand what God is doing in the world, I hold on to that.
 - David held on to that.

5. "I don't like the Old Testament God"

- People feel like the OT is God is his JV years; cranky. Got saved in the NT and became much more kind; no longer the God of wrath; He became gentle Jesus meek and mild

(God forgave David here in this OT story because)

Tim Keller shows you that God forgave David here, in this OT story, for 2 reasons:

- A. **He repented of his idol.** When David says, **"Let us fall into the hand of the Lord," vs. 14** what does that show you? David had wanted to count the people because he wanted to put his trust in the army, not in God. His army, his strength, was his idol. Now he says, "The safest place I could ever be is in the merciful hands of God." He repented of his idol.
- B. **Second reason God forgave David: The Gospel.**

[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.

[17] 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." [18] 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 angel of death comes to a certain spot in Jerusalem and God sees it and is grieved... and God has David buy a field right there in Jerusalem at that very spot and built an altar there.

- 2 Chronicles 3:1 tells you that threshing floor of Araunah's was at the top of Mt Moriah... which is where Abraham had offered the attempted sacrifice of Isaac, where God stopped him and told him to offer a lamb instead; and that threshing floor on Mt. Moriah is the very place that God had Solomon build the temple, which is where Israel would offer sacrifices of lambs for sin. And these sacrifices would point forward to a Messiah that was coming... Jesus, who would be the Lamb of God who would die once for all for the sins of the people. Many scholars believe it was on that very spot that Jesus died.

- Did you see, vs. 17 how David said, “Let your hand be against the Shepherd... these sheep, what have they done? Punish me.”
- But David couldn’t do that; he had his own sin. But at that field, God looked down through history and saw the Shepherd who really would be smitten for the sheep;
 - the word for “relented” in vs.16 means “God was grieved”:⁵ moved, thinking about His love for the people and Jesus who would die as a Lamb sacrifice for their sin;
 - he was moved to compassion thinking about us and about Jesus, and He forgave.

So, let me bring this to a close: The strange ending of 2 Samuel leaves you with 2 major points:

- **There’s always only been one way to be saved**
 - Back then they repented of their idols and believed the Gospel. That’s the same thing we do today.
- **The whole point of David’s life is not to point to King David, but to David’s son, King Jesus**
 - Again, David’s story in 2 Samuel ends by him committing the very sin that had started this whole thing. They wanted a king to replace God; he wanted a king’s army to replace God.
 - Many of the Old Testament books end in the same very curious way: big, bitter disappointment in someone who should have been a hero:
 - Moses, the Lawgiver, can’t go in the Promised Land, b/c he broke the law
 - Nehemiah, the rebuildier of the city, builds such a 2nd rate city that the people weep when they see it.
 - David, Israel’s greatest King, is a sinner who can’t save his people, if anything he repeats the sin of the people.
 - We need a Lawgiver that not only keeps the law but can forgive us where we broke it; a builder who can build an eternal kingdom that can never be shaken; a Shepherd who will not lose his sheep but die for them; a father who will not neglect his children but die in their place; a King who will not use his people but die in their place.
 - And that role can’t be filled by Moses or Nehemiah or David, it’s only filled by Jesus Christ, God’s Son.

Do you see what a beautiful picture 2 Samuel leaves you with? Israel dies because of the sins of their king. But it points you forward to the coming of King who would die for the sins of His people. Israel died for David’s sin; Jesus would die for ours. Israel got punishment because of the sins of their king, David; we get salvation because of the righteousness of our King, Jesus.

Which brings up one last problem that people have with Christianity that I wanted to touch on... a lot of people have a problem with the idea of original sin... DEFINITION: we are all born in sin because Adam sinned. How is that fair? I had this issue in college...

You kind of see it being repeated here, don’t you? People are suffering for the sin of David. That’s a bum rap.

- But (a) it’s not like they are innocent in this story. None of us are innocent either. They delighted in the strength of their king and army, just like David did. That was the original reason they wanted a king in the first place. We all delight in things besides God, just like Adam did. We’ve all, in our own way, eaten of the forbidden fruit.
- But *look at this*, yes they suffered for the one man David’s sin, but we are saved because of the work of One man, Jesus. We suffer because of the sin of one man, a sin we all eagerly participated

⁵ New American Commentary, 2 Samuel 24:16.

in; but we are saved by the work of one man, Jesus, who represented us and absorbed the full penalty for our sin on our behalf.

Bullpen:

[2] So 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." [3] 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?" [4] But the king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to number the people of Israel. [5] They crossed the Jordan and began from Aroer, and from the city that is in the middle of the valley, toward Gad and on to Jazer. [6] Then they came to Gilead, and to Kadesh in the land of the Hittites; and they came to Dan, and from Dan they went around to Sidon, [7] and came to the fortress of Tyre and to all the cities of the Hivites and Canaanites; and they went out to the Negeb of Judah at Beersheba. [8] So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. [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.

[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. [17] 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."

[18] 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." [19] So David went up at Gad's word, as the LORD commanded. [20] And when Araunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. And Araunah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground. [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." [22] Then Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him. Here are the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. [23] All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king." And Araunah said to the king, "May the LORD your God accept you." [24] But the king said to Araunah, "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. [25] 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.