

David's Mistake

2 Samuel 24

Lesson Outline

I. Sin of Numbering the People: 2 Samuel 24:1-9

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Sin of Numbering the People

2 Samuel 24:1-9

David's Decision: 2 Samuel 24:1-4

David's Choice

The chapter opens by telling us that the LORD'S anger was kindled against Israel. The reason is not given but the nation proved to be rebellious numerous times during David's reign. We do know the LORD'S anger is never misplaced. Some may wonder why God waited to bring judgment until later.

1. *LORD'S patience* – He is longsuffering and allows time to repent (2 Peter 3:9).
2. *LORD'S permission* – He allows the sinner to continue, He gives them up to their sin (Romans 1:28-32).

The passage also states that God moved David to sin. How can this be, seeing we know God tempts no man (James 1:13). The answer is found in the book of 1 Chronicles. There it becomes clear the devil provoked David to sin and the LORD allowed it (1 Chronicles 21:1). The devil was permitted to do what he does, tempt men to sin (Matthew 4:1-3). After being enticed, David gave into his lust and sinned (James 1:13-15). What must be remembered is that the LORD was angered with Israel, so He waited until David sinned before acting against the people. Judgment upon nations often comes through the pride of its rulers (Proverbs 16:18).

There was nothing wrong with the act of numbering the people. Moses was directed to do this on two occasions and did so without any repercussions (Numbers 1, 26). Apparently the problem with David's numbering was the motive (Proverbs 24:12).

1. *Perhaps lack of humility* – pride in his accomplishments (Psalm 119:21). David made it clear he wanted to know the number. It was for personal reasons.
2. *Perhaps lack of faith* – doubt in God's work. The number of fighting men would be encouraging to the flesh.
3. *Perhaps lack of focus* – attention on the temporal. It appeared to be about what he had at his disposal in this world.
4. *Perhaps lack of obedience* – in the method. When the census was taken it was the duty of the priests not the commanding general (Numbers 1:1-3, 26:1-3). Also, the census was to be accompanied by an atonement offering, which many believe was not received (Exodus 30:12-16).

Whatever the reason, David's actions were wrong before the LORD. "To number the people was an act indicative of ownership."¹ It was God's nation and the people were to be numbered only under His direction. It seems David was in more danger when at home than on the battlefield. Two of his poor choices were made in times he rested. It is important for the believer to always be on guard (1 Peter 5:6-8).

David Confronted

Joab was given the order to number the people, indicating the nation enjoyed a time of peace since he had time to oversee this assignment. This was to be done for David's pleasure, so he could know the number. Since that is the only reason provided it leads one to believe that it was an act of pride (Proverbs 29:3).

Joab respectfully questioned David's decision. The crafty general appears to have understood the motive. David wanted to look upon his great army. It is interesting that Joab, a man that lived unto himself, was able to notice David's mistake. It's possible for worldly men to have better understanding than rebellious believers.

1. *Joab's common sense* – he recognized the problems. The actual count would produce unnecessary work and burden the people. It would hurt the nation (1 Chronicles 21:3).
2. *Joab's companions* – he was not alone. The other leaders agreed with Joab (Proverbs 11:14). The men David recognized for bravery understood the mistake.

Joab was overruled. David was the king so his decision would stand. Refusing to heed Joab's warning, he demanded the census be taken. David adamantly chose to go forward in sin.

¹Arthur W. Pink, "The Life of David, Volume 2," (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981) p. 313.

David's Direction: 2 Samuel 24:5-9**Immediate Action**

Joab may have disagreed but he carried out his responsibilities. He questioned the king but did not rebel against him, so the captain of the host became involved in the sin because of David's foolish decision, it is clear our actions can affect others. It is wise to consider the results before making a decision (Proverbs 24:27). Beginning in the remote areas on the other side of the Jordan River, they covered the entire land as directed. According to the locations given in the chapter, they traveled in a counter-clockwise direction.

Incomplete Report

After nine months and twenty days, they returned to Jerusalem. Evidently the task was incomplete because Joab refused to finish (1 Chronicles 21:6). The proud act became an abomination to him, so he stopped short of counting the men from Levi and Benjamin. Joab and his men spent nearly a year working contrary to God's will.

1. *Wasted energy* – it could have been applied to a correct project.
2. *Wasted time* – it could have been used in a more profitable manner (Colossians 4:5).

The lengthy process hindered the nation. The totals reported in 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles seem to be conflicting (1 Chronicles 21:6). It must be remembered that the actual numbers were never recorded because the work remained unfinished (1 Chronicles 27:4). The numbers given may have been estimates or collected from information not yet audited. It is also possible the totals were based upon different groups of people. There is no reason to believe either of the records is inaccurate. Keep in mind this is an account of an incomplete census, taken with an incorrect motive by a reluctant general. One thing is clear, when we stubbornly act upon our own desires we will produce problems and confusion (Proverbs 28:25).

Suffering for Numbering the People

2 Samuel 24:10-25

David's Accountability: 2 Samuel 24:10-17**Recognition of the Sin**

At this point David's heart smote him, meaning he was convicted of his sin. David recognized his actions as being wrong and regretted them. This occurred when the men returned from their assignment. David probably thought he would be joyful but instead his heart smote him. He found that sin is never as good as it seems (James 1:15). Then and there, the great king looked for the LORD'S forgiveness (1 John 1:9). His repentant heart accepted the responsibility of his sinful conduct.

That morning the LORD sent Gad to David with a message. The king was given his choice of punishment. "A night of anguish could not, however, wipe out the wrong and folly of nine months."² David was forgiven but had to deal the results of his sin.

1. *Seven years of famine on the land* – the nation had endured a three-year famine. One twice as long would have been devastating.
2. *Three months of living on the run from his enemies* – David had done this already, twice (1 Samuel 21:10; 2 Samuel 15:17). He probably had no desire to live off the land again, knowing the nation would suffer as well.
3. *Three days of pestilence in the land* – this was the shortest in duration of the three. Considering the other punishments, it may have been appealing knowing it would not last long.

Given the option, David wisely chose to fall into God's hands. He knew the LORD was merciful, while men were cruel. The LORD would only give what was deserved, nothing more (Romans 2:6; Revelation 22:12). As a believer, he fell into the hands of the merciful LORD, willing to trust God in the matter. For unbelievers it is dreadful to be in the hands of the LORD, because He will give what is deserved (Hebrews 10:31).

Reaping for the Sin

The LORD sent a pestilence upon the land, which resulted in the loss of 70,000 men in Israel (Psalm 119:120). The men were from the entire land, Dan to Beersheba. The punishment fit the crime. The plague came that morning until the time appointed. Some believe the appointed time refers to the end of the three days, and others, the evening sacrifice on the first day (1 Kings 18:29, 36). Either way it was a dreadful and fearful time in the nation.

As the LORD'S angel prepared to deal with Jerusalem, he was refrained. Why, because the LORD beheld and repented of evil (1 Chronicles 21:15). This sounds strange and is often misinterpreted to support unbiblical teachings. First, we must consider what the LORD beheld. He saw David and the elders of Israel dressed in sackcloth on their faces before Him (1 Chronicles 21:15-16). The king of Israel, along with his leaders, humbly fell before the LORD seeking His mercy. Second, we must consider His ways. It is clear-cut in the scriptures that The LORD does not change (Malachi 3:6; James 1:17). That is settled. We do find the Bible using figures of speech that help us understand God. For example, it is said He was weary, but we know God cannot be tired (Isaiah 42:24; Malachi 2:17). In this case the LORD repented, He simply changed His direction in order to display mercy, like He does with sinners that seek His forgiveness through His Son Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Romans 6:23).

David was allowed to see the angel holding a sword over Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 21:16). What a sight to behold. David humbly entreated the LORD for the people, accepting responsibility for his sin instead of blaming others. (Leviticus 26:40-42). The repentant king was willing to bear the punishment

² F. B. Meyer, "Great Men of the Bible, Volume 2," (Michigan: Zondervan, 1982) p. 62.

for the entire nation. This was an incredibly selfless act. No wonder David was a man after the LORD'S own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). He knew the sin was his fault and accepted what the LORD had for him. It is good to remember that David never blamed the LORD or turned from Him.

David's Altar Unto the LORD: 2 Samuel 24:18-25

The Order

Gad was sent to David with another message. He was told to build an altar unto the LORD on the threshingfloor of Araunah the Jebusite. Threshingfloors were large areas set aside for beating grain. They were usually located on high ground in the open air, so the wind could purify the grain of the chaff and dust.³ The angel remained over this location, which was just north of the city during David's reign. It was also known as Mt. Moriah, the same ground where Abraham's knife was stopped from slaying Isaac (2 Chronicles 3:1). It was a place of mercy. Notice, the altar was God's idea, and not David's. Peace with God comes on His terms, which is through sacrifice (John 14:6; Romans 5:8-11).

The Obedience

David met with Araunah seeking to purchase the land. He did not seize the land but looked to buy it. Araunah eagerly greeted David. Evidently he and his sons were hiding in fear after seeing the angel hover above them (1 Chronicles 21:20). When asked his business David responded correctly.

1. *David was impartial* – he wanted to buy his threshingfloor for a fair price. There was no deception involved.
2. *David was informative* – he told him why, he wanted to build an altar unto the LORD so the plague on the people would end.

Araunah offered to give everything to David but the king insisted on purchasing the land and animals for sacrifice. He would not give unto God something that did not cost him. After the acquisition, David built an altar, then offered burnt and peace offerings unto the LORD. The plague upon the people ended.

The location eventually became the place of national worship. The ground where the LORD displayed His mercy to David would one day support the Temple. It was always David's desire to build the Temple for the LORD but he was not allowed to (2 Samuel 7:1-17). However, in this gracious act of kindness, the LORD allowed David to purchase the property the Temple would be built upon (Psalm 86:5, 100:5). This all came about through Israel's sin and David's pride. The LORD worked a great blessing through this difficult time (Romans 8:28).

³ John Lange, "Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Samuel," (Michigan: Zondervan, 1951) p. 608.