

David, the Angel and the Altar

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[0 : 00] Let's turn once again to that passage that we read earlier, 1 Chronicles chapter 21.

We're going to read from 1 Chronicles chapter 21. And we're going to read again at verse 26, page 419, 1 Chronicles 21 and verse 26.

And David built there an altar to the Lord and presented burnt offerings and peace offerings and called on the Lord. And the Lord answered him with fire from heaven upon the altar of burnt offering.

Then the Lord commanded the angel and he put his sword back into its sheath. Now, if you were reading along with me very carefully when we read that passage, you can't help but notice how intriguing and strange it is.

It's quite a disturbing passage in many ways. And it's the kind of passage where someone like myself who preaches the Bible, on the one hand, I'm intrigued by a passage like this.

[1 : 19] And I want to understand it. I want to grasp it at least as best I can. But at the same time, I hesitate from taking it as a sermon because of how strange it is.

But then I'm reminded of the fact that every part of God's word is God's word. And I must not ever say to myself, I have to leave that out because that is not somehow suitable.

We have to believe that all of God's word is suitable for the people of God. And every part of God's word is good for us to come together and to feed upon it.

But the other thing is that I know the kind of questions that people ask. And, of course, people ask simple, basic questions, but they also ask complicated questions. And it's likely that you have read this passage before and you've been intrigued and puzzled by it.

And you would like some kind of explanation about it. So that's the reason why I would like us to grasp the bull by the horns and to try and unfold this passage and open it up, at least to try and understand something of it, if not all of it.

[2 : 30] I'm sure that there are still going to be questions in our minds. That's always the case with the Bible. The Bible always raises questions within our minds. But what we need to do is to try and at least find out, well, what does the passage tell us about God himself?

Now, as I said, this passage takes place towards the end of the reign of David. It tells us about an incident that took place in which David counted his fighting men.

And it would appear from the passage that God was angry with him for doing that. And so God brought about a plague on Israel that was only stopped by God himself when the angel of the Lord, through whom the plague was coming on Israel, stopped.

And on that site, at the place where the angel stopped putting people to death, was the site where David built an altar to the Lord. That's it in a nutshell. But the passage, of course, raises a lot of very intriguing questions.

The first question that it raises is when you compare this passage, 1 Chronicles 21, with the parallel passage in 2 Samuel chapter 24. We didn't have time to read it this morning.

[3 : 39] And to compare the account that is given, there are quite important differences. The first difference between the two accounts is that in 2 Samuel, the man at the threshing floor is called Arona.

And in this passage, the man at the threshing floor is called Ornan. How do you explain that? The difference between the two names. That's the easiest question to explain. That's not a problem at all.

Many people in the Bible had two names. And just the same way as people have two names in these parts. And sometimes they're known by one, sometimes they're known by another. That's the least of our problems.

The second problem is, again, if you compare the two passages, the total number of fighting men in 2 Samuel is 800,000 men.

In 1 Chronicles, as we read, it was 1.1 million men. How do you explain the difference there? Well, I would again say that that's not a huge problem because it depends on the category of men that you're looking at.

[4 : 42] It's quite clear that these men were put into categories. For example, you had a category of men who were able to draw the sword and men in Judah compared with the men in Israel.

So it wasn't just a question of counting all the fighting men. They were put into categories. And it could be that the 800,000, it reflected one category of men.

So that's not a problem either. I don't have any difficulty with that. And you certainly can't come to me and say, oh, well, does this not show that the Bible contradicts itself? It doesn't show anything of the sort. That is a detail.

It's a detail that can easily be explained. Here's what I think is the most intriguing problem of all. The most intriguing problem of all is that if you read 2 Samuel, it is the Lord that incites David to count the men.

Here in this passage, verse 1, it is Satan that incites David to number Israel. Now, not only do we have a conceptual problem here, but we have a theological problem, and we have something that certainly doesn't seem to make sense.

[5 : 54] How can these two things be? 1 Chronicles 21, the passage we read, we read, it's Satan that incited David to number Israel. That's not a surprise.

It's Satan that tempts us to do evil. And we're going to see in a few moments' time why it was sinful for David to count the number of men in Israel. What is really intriguing is when you read the 2 Samuel passage, you find that it is the Lord that incited David to number Israel.

If we had time, we would have read the two passages, but we don't have time. It's the Lord. Now, there you do have a problem, I think, a problem that needs to be explained and needs to be looked into.

But there is another problem, and we're going to look at the last problem before we look at the third. And the last problem is simply this. Why was it sinful for David?

It was very clearly sinful. It was because David counted the fighting men of Israel that the Lord punished. Not only David, he punished Israel itself. Why was it sinful? And that, I think, is where I'd like to start this morning.

[6 : 57] Why was it sinful for David to count the fighting men? Well, let's look at some of the opinions. I don't think we can be hard and fast on this. There's one thing that's clear. It was sinful, and David knew it was sinful.

That's the important thing. And Joab knew. When David told Joab to count the fighting men, Joab hesitated, and he tried to argue with David, and he said, this is not right. You're going to bring guilt upon yourself by doing this.

So it was abundantly clear. However, God had made it clear in some sense that what he was doing is wrong. God always makes wrongdoing clear to us.

That's what the Bible is all about. It's all about God making clear to us. God will not hold us guilty for something we didn't know about. He makes it clear to each one of us what is right and what is wrong, and that's the whole point of the Bible, and particularly the law of God and the Ten Commandments and so on.

So what was wrong? What was sinful about what David did? Well, if you read Exodus, I'm just going to read it to you. Exodus chapter 30 and verse 11 to 14. Here's the first opinion. If you go back to Exodus chapter 30, the Lord said to Moses, So what this tells us is that when a census, for his life to the Lord when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them, each one who is numbered in the census shall give this half a shekel, according to the shekel of the sanctuary.

[8 : 31] The shekel is 20 geras. Half a shekel is an offering to the Lord. Everyone who is numbered in the census from 20 years old upwards shall give the Lord's offering. So what this tells us is that when a census was taken amongst the Israelites, a payment had to be made in respect of every man that was counted.

It was like a tax. It was like a poll tax. Why was that so important? It was important for them to acknowledge the Lord's ownership over Israel, that their lives depended entirely upon the Lord.

And that when they took account of all the vast number of men in Israel, and when they came to a number like this, 1.1 million men, can you imagine all these men gathered together?

Can you imagine the army, the size of the army? What's the first thing you would think of? If you were part of that army, what's the first thing you would think of? You would think this lot are invincible.

We are the people. Pride would swell into you. It's like, who's going to defeat us? And this was God's way of saying to them, that you are what you are only through my strength.

[9 : 52] And because I have made you, and I could, in a moment of time, destroy you tomorrow. You absolutely have to know for sure that you owe your lives and your strength and your power and your gifts and your existence to me and to me alone.

And you have to live every day in that knowledge. An important reminder for all of us, isn't it? And it's so easy to forget that our lives depend on God.

You wake up in the morning, you go through your routine, and you've got all your health and your strength, and you think that the day is going to go exactly as every other day had been, and you put your brain in motion, you put your brain in gear, and you go for it, and you achieve, and you enjoy, and you do, and you don't think of God.

You don't stop for a moment to think, I am what I am because God has made me the way I am. And I owe every breath, every moment, and God could bring it all to a close in a moment of time.

So important, isn't it? Even if you do trust the Lord Jesus, and I hope we all are followers of Jesus today, even as Christians, we can go through a whole day, a whole week sometimes, without giving much thought to the Lord himself.

[11 : 10] Oh, please don't let that happen. Don't me let that happen either. And this was a very important procedure that God had set into place so that they would never deny God's lordship over their lives.

You know this, you might be a person who rejects the gospel today. You still have to owe your existence to God. And that's what I can't quite fathom.

How a person can go through their lives knowing that they are what they are because God's made them. And yet, when God asks them to trust in him, they refuse.

I don't understand that. I'll leave that with you. Now, others say that counting his fighting men was sinful because it was pride in David's heart.

Counting his men to see how powerful his army was and not depending on the Lord's health. You remember when Gideon was the commander of the army and judges.

[12 : 17] You remember what God did to prove this very point. He sent most of them home. Remember the incident where they were lapping the water and when all of them were asked to go home, if they weren't up to the fight, they were all asked to go home.

He was left with 300 men. And that was to show to Gideon that he was utterly dependent on the Lord, that the battle was God's and wasn't dependent on the amount of strength or the power that they had.

Others, they tried to suggest that David was looking too much into the future. Counting the young men to see how strong the army would be in the future. But once again, that is sinful as well because the future belongs to God and we shouldn't look too much into the future without asking the Lord for help.

In any case, for whatever one of these reasons or even for a combination of these reasons, it was clear to Joab and it was clear to David that this was sinful. He was sinning against God and sinning grievously against God.

Hence, now we're going back to problem number three. Hence, it's not surprising to read at the beginning of this chapter that Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number them.

[13 : 32] Now that's no surprise at all. That's Satan's business. That's his job. That's his objective to persuade us by whatever means possible, either inwardly or outwardly, to get us to go astray and to do things that we know are sinful and are wrong.

It's not surprising. What is surprising is that if you read the 2 Samuel 24 passage, it says that it was the Lord who provoked him to do this. How can these two things be?

God and Satan doing the same thing together or so it appears. Well, first of all, it's not much help. I suppose, to be simplistic, you could say that God is simply giving permission to Satan to do this.

We often say that. And in a way, we're absolutely right. But that doesn't really help us understand the passage. And what I think we have to do is we have to ask, is there any other place in the Bible where anything similar takes place to help us to understand?

This is actually quite a useful methodology to adopt. Whenever you come across something strange in the Bible, you ask yourself, is there any other place where something similar happens and that will help me to understand what's happening here?

[14:51] And I would say, yes, there is. There are two other places in the Old Testament. One is in Numbers chapter 22 in the case of Balaam. Now, let's just stop for a moment and think about this man Balaam.

We know Balaam, of course, as the man to whom his donkey spoke. But I sometimes wonder if we really understand why his donkey spoke.

Let's just quickly think about the situation. The Israelites were going all the way through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land and they stopped in the land of Moab. And the Israelites were very many in number.

There were millions of Israelites and the king of Moab saw them and he got a fright and he wanted to destroy them in some way. He knew he wasn't strong enough himself to destroy them with his army so he resorted to sorcery.

And so he sent some of his men to a man called Balaam who lived hundreds of miles away and they asked him to come all the way to Moab and to put a curse on Israel.

[16:01] And somehow or other Balaam was in touch with the Lord. I don't understand that but he was in touch with the Lord. He still had some kind of remnant of knowledge of God and knowledge of the truth of God even though he was into sorcery.

In any case the first thing that Balaam did was he asked God whether he should go with these men to put a curse on Israel and God said on no account go with them.

So he told them I can't go. So off they went back to the king of Moab and they said Balaam refuses to come with us. Well that wasn't good enough for the king of Moab he said he sent other envoys all the way back to Balaam and to ask him once again.

Balaam's answer should have been I've told you once what God's answer was. But instead of that he secretly wanted to go with them.

That's the thing. Because he was so covetous himself for the reward that was being offered to him although God was saying one thing to him his inward lust was saying something else.

[17:16] his covetousness was saying something else. And it was like he was saying I know what God says but oh I wish God would say something else. So do you know what he did?

The second time the men arrived and asked him to go back to curse Israel he asked God again.

And God knew what was in his heart and God said to him okay go.

Go. But it's not that God was approving of him it was not that God was commanding him it was God saying to him if that's what's in your heart go for it.

That's what you want to do anyway. You don't want to listen to me. And you know the frightening thing is that that's the way that we are with the Lord sometimes isn't it?

You and I both know what's right and what's wrong but there's another voice within us saying that we want to do what's wrong. And even if we give some kind of lip service to God we say well I know what God is saying because we want to do what is wrong God in his providence says to us you're free to do it.

[18:37] that's a frightening thing you know that isn't it? That's a really really frightening scenario. And I put it to myself and I put it to you today is that the position we're in today?

That God has said to us in his word he has made it absolutely clear and we have chosen the wrong path and sometimes you think well you know he hasn't struck me down with lightning so it can't be all that wrong you know if that's the way his law but that doesn't mean you're not accountable to him and Balaam was accountable to him he was accountable and it was that was the reason why his donkey spoke to him it was God saying to him a donkey is more controllable than you are the donkey is more obedient than you are he's more faithful to you than you are to God and it took the donkey for him to speak to tell him that now that's only part of the story I know but but I believe that that is an instance where Satan is working on the one hand and God is working on the other there's another instance of course in the book of

Job Job in chapter one you remember that that mysterious first chapter where there's a conversation between Satan and God and God says to Satan then Satan answered the Lord and said does Job fear God for no reason have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has you have blessed the work of his hands and his possessions have increased the land in other words Satan saying to God no wonder he fears you because his life is luxury he's living in ease that's why he fears you you let me do what I want to do to him and he will curse you to your face Satan said you know what the Lord said all right go for it it's a very very strange passage isn't it it's a really strange passage that results in

Satan doing so much damage to Job and yet at the same time God is working at the same time in order to test Job and to prove to Satan and to prove to every generation beyond that Job's faith was real there's one thing that comes across in the book of Job so much happened to him in such misery that we you and I will never understand and yet he comes through the whole thing and he's trusting God and God blesses him at the end of the day so all I want to as you go through the story and

David counts his fighting men and as a consequence of that the punishment that God brings upon Israel is that he brings a plague now he brought the punishment on Israel not just on David you would expect that this being David's guilt that God would punish David and his house because of it but that's not what God did he punished Israel so why did he take it out on Israel well can I say first of all the Lord never does anything without good reason we have absolutely no right to come to a conclusion that somehow God is being unjust God never ever acts unjustly so if he's punishing Israel he's doing it for a reason and at the right time we can absolutely trust God's sense of judgment and his anger I hope that the anger of God is something that frightens all of us and that leads us to trust in Jesus as the way of forgiveness but the anger of

[23 : 05] God is something that is good it wouldn't be part of God if it wasn't good we can rejoice today in God's anger it's a strange thing to say isn't it we can love the anger of God God's anger is part if we love the Lord we love him as he is in his entirety and we can do that we can rejoice in the anger of God knowing as we'll see in a few moments that in wrath God remembers mercy but let's just be absolutely clear that God did not punish the people of Israel without having a reason now if you ask what was the reason we're not told but there were reasons for example it wasn't that far back in history since many thousands of people deserted David and they rebelled against him they joined Absalom in rebelling against David in doing that they were rebelling against God's anointed they were sinning against God I'm sure some of them truly repented and came back to where they should have been but some of them weren't so it's not that

Israel were somehow whiter than white guiltless they weren't they had sinned in that way and perhaps other ways as well they deserved God does not bring his punishment on anybody without that person that person deserving it and the same is true for Israel so God he did so by giving three options the famine he said you can choose a famine you can choose to fall into your hands on the enemies or you can choose a plague and David's answer showed the kind of faith that lay deep in his heart you know there are many things wrong with David it's not hard to look at the life of David doesn't take as long before you come across his faults and his flaws and his sinfulness and yet in it all David is trusting God and he's relying upon God's mercy and David's answer is truly a gracious one I will fall into the hand of the

Lord for his mercy is great and by that he knew that whatever God would do his nature would not change and it's better to fall into the hands of God than into the hands of men so God punished his people I don't know who they were all of whom died in the plague but I know that this passage shows us that his anger was great and many people just died as a result of what God did through his angels and I guess it's like a picture of the world today a world that is under the wrath of God in Romans chapter 1 God makes it very plain to us the apostle makes it plain to us that he is angry with this world and one day this world will be accountable to him the world is accountable today to him one day we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ and is this passage any more terrifying and any when we say that it's a severe passage it is but is any more severe than what the Bible says about the end of the world where men and women will be calling upon the rocks to fall on them and to save us from the wrath of the lamb God never changes yesterday today and forever so there is nothing there ought to in a sense not to be anything strange about about the Lord deciding in his justice to bring punishment so far everything is as we would expect but it's what comes next that is truly truly marvelous marvelous verse 15 and God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it

and as he was about to destroy the Lord saw the Lord saw and he relented from the calamity let me put it another way in wrath

God remembered mercy that's what this passage tells us it tells us that God's justice is absolutely perfect and he both is the God of justice perfect justice and he's the one who executes justice but but God is a merciful God let's be clear about what's happening here I just I want to be absolutely clear in the last five minutes or so he speaks and he commands his angel to stop but look at what the passage tells us so the angel stopped as soon as God uttered the word he stopped destroying the people but he didn't disappear he stood there with his sword in his hand held out over Jerusalem between heaven and earth and while he has stopped there and while the sword is held out over Jerusalem what that tells us is although

[28 : 21] God has stopped the matter is not concluded it's like the angel is poised over Jerusalem and you don't know what's going to happen next until you read the rest of the passage where David and there's a sense of urgency about what David does the angel is stopped at the threshing floor of this man so David went and he said to Ornan give me the site of the threshing floor so that I may build on it an altar of the Lord and of course there's this little discussion about the price that was going to be paid David insists that he gives the full price of the threshing floor he does that he gives him the money and he builds an altar and he makes a sacrifice he builds an altar and he places the sacrifice on it and then and there is where the matter is concluded because what do we read then we read that the fire from heaven came and consumed the sacrifice that David had built on the altar in other words instead of the people of Israel or the rest of the people of Israel continuing to suffer the plague that God was bringing upon them the matter was concluded when God's wrath it didn't disappear but it was turned on to the sacrifice and instead of the people suffering destruction the sacrifice accepted the wrath of God which is of course what a sacrifice is all about an animal in the old testament was killed it was put to death instead of the guilty person so that instead of the guilty person being punished because of their sin the animal was suffering that it suffered and died that's the whole point of the sacrifice and here is the place where God's wrath is turned away from the people and onto the sacrifice and here was the place that David decided that this temple would be built why was the temple built as a place where people would come and worship no but as a place where sacrifice would be made on a day by day basis because it was through the shedding of the blood of the sacrifice that the sins of

Israel would be forgiven and cleansed why because God's wrath that was directed upon them was directed upon the sacrifice and there's another place not so far from the threshing floor of Ornan a place to which all of this passage looked forward one day where the sacrifice would be made the one sacrifice that everything in the Old Testament looked forward to when Jesus none other than Jesus Christ the Son of God himself was made the Bible tells us was made to be sin for us what that means is that he took our guilt upon himself and the wrath of God the anger of God that we deserved was placed upon him and poured out upon him so that we would be free from sin so that we would be born again and so that

God would freely show us and display to us his mercy so that he would create within us a clean heart a pure heart so that we would be new people by God's grace through faith in him so this passage intriguing and strange as it is it points to a God who in his own perfect justice is merciful and a God who has done everything that was possible to bring that mercy to us in the person of his only son Jesus Christ our sacrifice at Calvary it was this little sacrifice through which the whole of Israel was saved that day but that looked forward to the great day when Jesus Christ himself would be the Lamb of God and he would lay down his own life as the payment for our sin so I would ask you once again this morning because every time you hear of the cross even in this obscure passage you can't get away from the cross

I would ask you having been confronted with it again what does it mean to you what does Jesus mean to you is he just an interesting story is he just a source of your questions or is he the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world in whom you trust with all your heart this morning that's what God asks us and commands us all to do to come to him in faith and to confess that like the children of Israel you deserve nothing but his anger and his punishment but you trust in that altar and in that sacrifice where Jesus paid the price for our sin that's what being a Christian is a Christian is a person to whom Jesus is everything because he forgave you from your sin and I pray and I hope that

God will speak to you through Calvary through the Son of God and bring you to himself let's pray our Father in heaven we give thanks for your word and we pray that you will bless your word to us and forgive us and not everything that we have done against you we're conscious of our sin and our need of a savior and we ask that you will bless your word to us just now in Jesus name Amen we're going to sing together in Psalm 85 Bye