

David's Census

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[0 : 00] 2 Samuel 24 and 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.

Once again, a chapter that raises all kinds of issues and questions and problems. Especially when you become familiar with the other account of the same event, which is found in 1 Chronicles chapter 21.

And if you go home and read that, you'll know what I'm talking about. Because the information in that account is different from the information in this chapter.

And we're left wondering, well, is there a contradiction? Or how then can you explain the differences in the two accounts? And the differences are quite stark.

[1 : 37] For one thing, in 2 Samuel, the man at the threshing floor is called Arona. And in 1 Chronicles chapter 21, the same account, the man is called Ornan.

How do you explain? Well, actually, that's an easy one. Because often in the Bible, people had two names. Or they were known by some people as one name or known by other people as another one.

That's not a problem. However, there are other problems. In this chapter, 2 Samuel, the number of the men counted by David is 800,000.

In 1 Chronicles chapter 21, it is 1.1 million. Now, that is a big difference. There's a big difference between 800,000 and 1.1 million.

But again, it may not be a problem. In fact, I would suggest to you it's not a problem. Because if you're taking a census, the way they were doing that, then you're probably dividing the numbers into different categories.

[2 : 47] And the number that you arrive at from one perspective may be one category. And the number you arrive at from another perspective may be a different category.

So here we have the number of valiant men were 800,000. The 1.1 million may have been a different area or a different age range or whatever.

It doesn't necessarily make for a contradiction. There's an even greater problem than these two, though. Here in this chapter, the beginning of the chapter, we read that in verse 1 that God incited David against Israel.

And he said, go number Israel and Judah. So in this chapter, we read that God was behind the action of David to count the number of men in Israel and Judah.

However, in 1 Chronicles chapter 21 and verse 1, we have an entirely different picture altogether because we read, then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.

[4 : 01] That is a problem. There's not many ways in which you can reconcile the two opposite extremes, God and the devil.

That is a problem. How can these two things be? And then there's another problem. And the question, I suppose, which lies at the very heart of the chapter was, why was it so sinful?

And it clearly was because it brought about God's judgment and his punishment. Why was it sinful for David to count the number of fighting men that he had in Israel and Judah?

All of these questions, of course, arise. And any thinking person who's reading the Bible and comparing the Bible and reading the Bible as he should, using his brain, is bound to come to note these questions down.

There is nothing wrong with that. I would encourage you to do that. And anybody who comes with these questions, at least they show that they're reading the Bible. There's nothing worse than ignorance. Whenever we think, when the person who comes to me and says, you know, here's one

account and another account, and how do you reconcile?

[5 : 12] That's a great problem to have. Because it means that the person is actually reading the Bible intelligently, as we should. The worst thing in the world is the person who comes with an objection to the Bible, and when you ask that person, have you read the Bible, he says, no, I haven't.

There's no excuse for ignorance. So these are intelligent questions, questions that we need to come up with, and that inevitably arise if we're going to be reading the Bible in the right way. Well, let's take the question first, why was it wrong or sinful for David to count the men of Israel? Well, needless to say, there are various opinions on this, and I'll just mention all of them because they're quite interesting, I think. First of all, in Exodus chapter 30, God commanded Moses, when you take the census, so there were times in Israel when it was okay to do a census. In fact, it was expected to do a census. It's just good government to know how many people you have and in what category or age or gender or family or whatever they come in.

[6 : 26] And so God said to Moses in chapter 30 of Exodus, when you take the census of the people of Israel, each shall give a ransom. Now, here's the bit, I think. Each shall give a ransom for his life to the Lord when you number them, that there may be no plague among them when you number them.

Why was it that there had to be a payment every time a census was done? Well, here's what I think. When a census was done, it always gave rise to the temptation towards pride.

Whenever you count anything, whether it's your bank account, well, I suppose it depends on how much is in your bank account, but whenever you count something, you can either do it by way of good management or you can do it out of a sense of complacency and a sense of pride and a sense of self-worth and self-confidence and self-elevation.

And that is what I believe lay behind David's attempt to count the people. And the reason why a payment had to be made was this was God's reminder that ultimately the people of Israel, it wasn't about how many fighting men they had, it was about their strength depended on the power that God gave them.

And they were a people that were set apart to be dedicated to the Lord. They were God's people. And it was not by might and not by power, but by his spirit that they were to make progress and that they were to achieve any success, whether it was military success or economic success or whatever, that it was good.

[8 : 15] They were God's people. And I believe David went hopelessly wrong because it arose out of pride in David's heart.

Perhaps also he was looking too much into the future, coming to the close of his reign. The aging process is there. He's worried about the future. And so he's looking to the number of his men to secure, to make sure that his future was secure.

But he should never have done that without recognizing at the same time it was foolish. Even Joab, even Joab, recognized the foolishness and the sinfulness of what David was doing.

And he tried to argue with him. But David, for once, he got the upper hand. And David insisted, he was determined, that Joab should go about and spend nine months counting the men of Israel.

So, it's not surprising. When we read that it was sinful for David to count the people, it's not surprising for us to read in 1 Chronicles that Satan incited David to do so.

[9 : 24] What is surprising is what we read here. Is that the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel and he incited David against them, saying, Go and number Israel and Judah.

Is that not a contradiction? I mean, surely, it's either one or the other. I mean, you can't get two more opposites than God doing something and the devil doing something.

Surely, they both can't be doing the same thing. Well, in actual fact, from one perspective, that's exactly what's happening. And that's the only way you can explain this.

But with entirely different motives. When we read here that the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, first of all, let's note that God had a grievance, a righteous grievance, against his own people.

And the grievance, it appears, was long term. And it didn't have anything to do with David counting the men. That just was the last straw, if you like.

[10 : 32] God's grievance went all the way back. And I would suggest to you that his grievance, the answer as to why God's anger was kindled against his people, went all the way back to the

numbers, to the thousands of them that rose up against David when Absalom rebelled.

That was a capital offense. Remember what we said when we saw the rebellion that Absalom staged. That to rise up against David was to rise up against God's anointed.

And to rise up against God's anointed was an act of defiance and rebellion against God himself. This was a divine, if you like, a capital offense.

As much as anything else. Because it went against a divine command. And so, what we, what I understand this to be saying is that God has determined in his heart that he is going to bring his righteous punishment on his own people.

And of course, there are all kinds of questions here. There were plenty of people in the world where there was rebellion against kings and violence and corruption and cheating and murder.

[11:55] Is God doing the same thing to them? Well, we don't know. But what we do know is that the people of God attract the wrath of God.

And that's quite a scary thought. Actually, when you go back into the Old Testament, it was never an easy thing to have God as your God.

It was much more straightforward for the Philistines and, in a way, it was much more straightforward for the Philistines and the pagan nations. Because they didn't have the living and the true God.

But what made Israel special was that they had the living and the true God dwelling amongst them as a people. He had chosen them out from all the nations in the world and he had connected himself to them.

Now, you might think, well, there's no greater privilege in the world. And there isn't! But that made it hugely terrifying for the people of God.

[12:58] And it became a liability to them. And you see that on several occasions. Particularly when the people of Israel are making their way through the wilderness. You remember the sons of Aaron.

And they went wrong. In one respect, they offered strange fire before the Lord. And because of that, God's anger burned against them and they perished. Or you remember Uzzah.

the man when they were transporting the ark of God into Jerusalem in the day of David when he came to the throne and when the oxen stumbled. Of course, there should never have been oxen in the first place.

That's where they went wrong. And Uzzah put his hand out to stabilize or to make sure that the ark of God stayed on the cart on which it was being transported.

And again, God broke out against him and he perished. So having God as your God, the living and true God, was no comfortable existence.

[13:59] It meant that you were under specific responsibility to keep his word. And of course, God made his word abundantly clear. He made it clear time and time again.

And if you fail to keep his word, then you went against what he had clearly commanded. So in this case, thousands of them having risen up against David, they had sinned against God and they had brought upon themselves God's righteous anger.

And so what this first verse is telling us is, is that God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass.

That's what the catechism tells us. He foreordains. And often in the Old Testament you'll find that. You'll find that when an event takes place, that the event, the cause of that event is attributed to God himself.

Because there's a recognition in the Bible that behind everything lies the sovereignty of God. God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass.

[15:16] Now that does not make him responsible for David's actions. David's actions were sinful. His actions were sinful.

So we're not saying that God somehow tempted David in order to get him to sin. sin. Because if that's the case, we really do have a problem.

The Bible tells us that God cannot be tempted by sin. Neither does he tempt anyone. But it also tells us that he stands behind every event that takes place.

And that's the only way if you deny that, then how are you going to then explain the cross? where evil men arrested the Son of God and when they took him and they mocked him and they scourged him and they whipped him and they beat him and they tried him in a mock trial and they crucified him saying we will not have this man to reign over us.

Crucify him, crucify him. And yet God stood behind the actions of the was he responsible for their sin? No he wasn't. They were responsible for their sin.

[16 : 35] And yet behind the whole event was the sovereignty of God and all its mystery we cannot understand God's sovereignty. All we can say is what we've said already that he foreordains whatsoever comes to pass.

Now you take that and you think about it, there's no harm in thinking about it, it's a natural thought, but don't ever expect to fully understand it because you can't. Here is God, here is the writer in this chapter and he is recognizing that God is God and that as God he is sovereign and he permits his own will and foreordains whatever comes to pass.

So God is seeing into David's heart and he allows him to do what he wants even although it is sinful, which again is quite a scary thought isn't it?

God has given us freedom to choose between right and wrong and sometimes our actions have consequences but just because we have the liberty to do something doesn't make it right.

I think sometimes of Balaam, you remember that strange story in the book of Numbers chapter 25 where the king of Moab wants to destroy Israel and he has this clever plan of putting a curse on them so he sends some men to a man a seer a prophet called Balaam and he's one of the most enigmatic characters in the Bible and he wants to get Balaam to come all the way to Moab and to stand to put a curse on the people of God so he sends men and they've got loads of money they promise him loads of money and they go to see him and they say nice things about him and they tell him that the king of Moab wants he's got a special assignment for him and they flatter him with all kinds of nice words and so you can tell that Balaam really wants to go because his heart is not right with God but he knows he's got the wisdom enough he's got enough wisdom to know that he wants to know what

[18 : 49] God has to say first of all so he goes he goes to he says to the Lord shall I go with him and first of all God says no do not go now that should have been the end of the matter that was God's word so the men went all the way back to Moab and the king of Moab's having none of it and he sends them all the way back in fact he sends others more important than they were and they go to Balaam again and they say will you please we'll give you pretty much anything you want we'll give you status we'll give you power we'll give you money you just name your price and Balaam wants to go so he says to the Lord can I not go and God said go not because it was right but because God knew what was in his heart that is a scary thought when the power of what we want can so over overshadow our thinking and overwhelm our thinking that we get God to allow us to do what we want instead of listening to his word and surrendering to his word as it comes in the first place when God says no he means no when God says something is sin it is sin and we need to accept it as that whatever the convoluted processes of our minds are when God says something he means it and we need to accept it if we're going to live by his word anyway

David of course allowed himself his own pride to get the better of him and he he decided to go against what he knew what was right and he did what was wrong and this was the way in which God was going to bring his righteous anger against his people for rebelling against him so he does so by giving David a choice and the choice is this either famine either enemies or plague and David says something that was very wise he says he said to the Lord 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 so God brought about his punishment on Israel and he sent a pestilence he sent a plague on Israel from morning until the appointed time it must have been a massive plague a deadly plague because we read that 70,000 men died there is by the way nothing we've said this before there is nothing unfair about what

God does he never does anything unjust and unfair we read a thing like this and we say well maybe I would have done things different we must never say that because anything that God does our so-called wisdom has to surrender to his and if 70,000 men died that is because God's will is that their time had come their days were ended and our days will come to an end as well in the will and in the plan of God it is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment it's true for all of us God sent a plague the angel his angel went throughout the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba and 70,000 men died and it was at that point when he seemed to be doing his worst in verse 16 that the angel stretched out his hand towards Jerusalem to destroy it and it was at that point the

Lord relented from the calamity he said enough stop don't do any more he was just about to strike the capital city the city of Jerusalem and the angel of the Lord had to stop it was a wee bit like where when God reached out his hand when Abraham was just about to kill his son Isaac and he said stop don't lay your hand on the boy right in the middle of what he was doing in the middle of the carnage the destruction the awfulness the misery of what was happening God stopped why because why why did he because because all of a sudden he's changed his mind no all of a sudden because because God's justice turns into mercy no all of a sudden because God feels sorry for us it wasn't that it's because in wrath he remembers mercy and that is something that we've seen before which is a basic foundational principle of the

Bible and of the gospel that in wrath God remembers mercy what we have here is in a way a picture of the whole world that the Bible tells us is under the wrath of God because we've rebelled against God and we've gone our own way and we've chosen to do our own thing we've chosen to turn our back on God and if ever there was evidence of that in any generation it is in today's world and if ever today's world needed to be reminded including ourselves that we stand in the wrath of God and if ever we needed to be awakened to that it has got to be today where it seems that whatever the Bible says the opinion of the world will be the opposite to it and that's what's going to make it so difficult for Christians in the future when you go out there and when you say that you're a

[24 : 53] Christian you are going to be quizzed and you are going to be marginalized and you are going to be laughed at and mocked and you may have to suffer because of your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because the world does not want to know that God is angry that's upsetting that's distressing makes me feel afraid and there is a law now there are laws now coming in whenever I feel afraid and if you say to me that God is angry with me then I am afraid and my life is in distress and I need to sue you for that that's what's going to happen it's happening already too right

God is angry I'm tempted to say I'm sorry but I'm not sorry I can't be sorry how can I be sorry for something that's true and if it's true then the question is do you accept it or not in the future I think we're going to have to in church we're going to have to every time we read the Bible we're going to have to say by the way ladies and gentlemen I'm going to read this chapter and I have to say to you that some readers may find the what I'm going to read upsetting and if that is the case then so be it but you know what's going to happen and what I pray will happen is that that will arouse a new curiosity in a new generation a curiosity in which a new generation will want to know what this controversial book says and what is it about this

Christian message which is so explosive and which has led to so much upset and I hope and pray that a new generation will search the gospel for themselves and then they will discover that it's true that God is angry with this world but that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life because only it's only against the backdrop of the anger and the justice on the righteousness of God that the gospel gleams in all its brilliance and in all its majesty you can't have one without the other and that's what we have in this story the angel of the

Lord God says to him stop it is enough 1st chronicle says that the angel was in mid-air with a sword in his hand somebody else said God pressed the pause button and the angel is suspended in mid-air above this at this precise location in Jerusalem the threshing floor of Arona and God came to David and he said quick go to the owner of the threshing floor and buy the land of him and offer a sacrifice so David on the double he ran to Arona and he said look he said I'll buy your threshing floor from you I need to make a sacrifice why was it so urgent to make God was suspended in mid year because God wasn't finished the matter wasn't resolved God had simply put everything on hold until the sacrifice ascends to

God and only when the sacrifice ascends will God's justice be satisfied but there's more than that because David himself when he goes to Arona and he buys the threshing floor and he says to Arona I need to buy your threshing floor Arona says because I don't want your money David says no you don't get this do you I need to pay for it I need to pay the full price do see what's happening we've seen the gospel in all of these chapters we're seeing it again once again here in David God's anointed and he has to pay the full price himself so that the sacrifice can rise to God because it's only as the sacrifice rises to God that God's anger and his justice will be satisfied David and the sacrifice become one David paying the full price so that the sacrifice the payment can be made for the sins of his people do do you do you get it do you see what's happening do you see the picture do you see how it points to

[30 : 45] David's greater son God's anointed who pays the full price in giving himself as the sacrifice the fascinating thing about this chapter is this that this was the precise location Mount Moriah this was the very spot which in the past Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac until God put out his hand and said stop that was the precise moment and the location where God provided a ram to take the place of Isaac's son so that atonement could be made but more than that it was the place where the temple was going to be built this was the location when David's son Solomon was going to be why was that so important because the temple was the place where God's presence came to dwell with his people and where sacrifices were going to be made so that God could be reconciled to his own people and where their sin could be forgiven and where they could live in fellowship with him and where they could enjoy his presence and not so far away was the location where the son of God was crucified as the sacrifice in which God's anger was assuaged which his wrath was satisfied because the justice of God is satisfied only where the sacrifice is made why is that because

God's wrath which was up until that moment directed and focused on the people who were being put to death was now focused on the burnt offering and so it was turned God's anger was turned away just like it was the day that the son of God gave himself on the cross and God's anger was turned away from you and me so that we could live and so that we could be set free from sin everything points to Jesus it always does wherever you look in the Bible it points to Jesus that's because Jesus stands at the center of the Bible God wants us tonight to see Jesus to look on Jesus not to try and be right with him by our own efforts or by our own goodness you'll never make it but by coming to him in faith and in repentance by asking him to be your savior by asking him to change your life and to open your eyes he will do that because he has said ask and you will receive seek and you will find knock and the door will be opened to you

I'm so glad for these difficult passages they're so difficult to study to try and understand they leave us still with lots of questions but if they point us to Jesus it doesn't get better than that let's pray our father in heaven we ask that tonight that you will show us Jesus that you will reveal him to us and make known to us how much each of us needs to have him as our savior if we have him already we need to be made like him we need to see more of him we need to obey him we need to love him more and more we pray for anyone tonight who doesn't have him who doesn't yet follow him we pray that even through this obscure passage that you will speak to them and draw and draw them to the cross in

Jesus name amen we will sing together in closing from psalm number 32 psalm 32 verse 5 verse 5 I should have said that's page 38 it's the sing psalms version of psalm 32 verse 5 to verse 8 and the tune is Arlington then I laid bare my sin to you the guilt that lay within I said O Lord I have transgressed and you forgave when I confessed you pardoned all my sin verse 5 to verse 8 we'll stand to sing that lay within

[36 : 26] I said O Lord I have transgressed and you forgave when I confessed you pardoned all my sin O death that all we pray to you while you are to be found surely when waves are screaming fast and mighty waters rise in front you keep them safe and sound you are my hiding place

O Lord my true security you keep me safe in troubled days you circle me with joyful praise when you have set me free I will instruct you by my word and guide you in my way my counsel I will give to you my eye will keep your path in view and watch you day my day the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest and abide with each one of you both now and always Amen