

BIBLE SERIES: *"EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"*

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OT-66 1-5-2008

2 SAMUEL 20-24 DAVID'S FINAL PERIOD – THE CENSUS – MT. MORIAH



In the last study, David had been victorious against his rebellious son, Absalom. Now many came who had been with Absalom seeking the king's forgiveness. Shimei, who had slandered him, asked for mercy and David pardoned him. He also forgave Mephibosheth, Jonathan's lame son, for not accompanying him into exile. He was very grateful to Barzillai, who had greatly helped him while in exile. This all shows David's great generosity.

But when David crossed the Jordan and arrived at Gilgal, on his way to Jerusalem, another crisis erupted. Soldiers from the 10 tribes of Israel who had fought for him, now saw the Judahites were getting all the glory. They also wanted to appear prominently in the victory parade but the Judahites insisted on personally escorting King David to Jerusalem.

This jealousy and rebuff led to another rebellion. "And there happened to be there a rebel, whose name was Sheba the son of Bichri, a Benjamite. And he blew a trumpet and said, 'We have no share in David, nor do we have inheritance in the son of Jesse. Every man to his tents, Oh Israel!' So every man of Israel deserted David and follow Sheba. But the men of Judah, from the Jordan as far as Jerusalem, remained loyal to their king" (2 Sam. 20:1-2).

David knows this could start secession in the country, and is fully committed to keeping the nation united. He acts decisively and tells his new commander, Amasa, to round up an army and present himself in 3 days to get the orders. But Amasa procrastinates and David, exasperated, names Abishai, Joab's brother, as the new army chief and commands him to quickly stamp out the rebellion.

Abishai, who was accustomed to being under his brother Joab's command, is uncomfortable, but obeys his uncle David. Joab goes along, still smarting from his demotion and then being replaced by Amasa, who he considers a traitorous general. At Gibeon, Amasa shows up and finds out he has been removed as commander. Joab, his cousin, sees a chance to avenge himself and pretends to warmly greet him, but then assassinates him in cold blood, as he had a previous general, Abner. Eventually all these sins will catch up with Joab (1 Kings 1:5-6; 2:28-35).

Abishai then yields the position to his brother Joab and they continue to pursue Sheba. They find him hiding in northern Israel. A wise lady prevents further

bloodshed by asking Joab if he would be satisfied with Sheba's head instead of destroying the city, and Joab agrees. Soon Sheba's head is tossed over the walls, and the place is spared. They returned to Jerusalem with the news of Sheba's defeat, and David reluctantly accepts Joab's usurpation of the head post. He did get things done, was a courageous leader--but he was also ruthless and his personality was so imposing even David at times yielded to it.

Then another disaster strikes. A terrible drought hits the land for three long years and ends in a famine. David finally realizes this is not a normal weather phenomenon and asks God why it is happening. God answers him, "It is because of Saul and his bloodthirsty house, because he killed the Gibeonites" (2 Samuel 21:1).

The Gibeonites, you will recall, were the Canaanite tribe at the time of Joshua who disguised themselves as travelers and made a peace treaty. They were incorporated into Israel and helped the Levites as woodcutters and water carriers (Joshua 9:15-23).

Nevertheless, Saul, in his overzealousness, had killed some of them, breaking the peace treaty. God was incensed over this and required David to make amends with them. They told him the way to avenge the deaths was to turn over seven of Saul's descendants. David carried this out, but left Mephiboseth alive, out of his love for Jonathan.

After the seven are hung, Rizpah, Saul's concubine and a mother of two of them, refuses to leave their bodies until the curse of the drought is lifted from the land. "From the beginning of the harvest until the later rains poured on them from heaven (late April to October) (21:10)." So the rains came as God had promised. When David is told of Rizpah's remarkable example of dedication, he is moved to gather the bones of those men and arrange for a decent burial. He also retrieves the bones of Saul and Jonathan from Jabesh-Gilead, and has all of these Benjamites buried together in Zelah of Benjamin.

There was no rest for David, however. Now the Philistines attack Israel and David must go out to battle. But at his age, he was almost killed, and only the protection of Abishai prevents him from dying at the hands of another giant Philistine. After this, his men prevent him from going out to battle again, "lest you quench the lamp of Israel" (2 Samuel 21:17).

They knew how valuable he was as a righteous king. In another battle, Goliath's brother was killed by Elhanan, and eventually, the whole family was exterminated. As the Bible says, "These four [giants] were born to the giant in Gath, and fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants" (21:22).

Next, towards the end of his reign, David praises God for having delivered him from all his foes, in a wonderfully inspiring psalm repeated in Psalm 18.

In chapter 23:1-7, we read of David's final words before he finishes his rule. In it he expresses the ideals of a kingly ruler who must have the following three qualities:

1. He must be *just*. This is talking about obeying God's commandments and applying them to deal fairly with his people.
2. He must *fear* of God--which means greatly respecting God, fearing Him more than men, for he must give an accounting to Him.
3. He must set an *example* as a light shining for others to emulate, not just sounding pretty.

Following this, David's thirty-seven mighty men are mentioned and their incredible exploits. A good description of them it is found in 1 Chronicles 12:8. "Mighty men of valor, men trained for battle, who could handle shield and spear, whose faces were like the faces of lions, and were as swift as gazelles on the mountains." It is interesting who was the last of them--Uriah, the Hittite, whom David betrayed (2 Sam. 23:29). The Bible doesn't hide the fact Uriah was a valiant and honorable man.

Next comes a very sad section. Toward the end of his reign, David's vanity gets the best of him--and numbers the males of Israel. "Again the anger of the Lord was aroused against Israel, and He moved David against them to say, 'Go, number Israel and Judah'" (1 Sam. 24:1). The parallel section in 1 Chronicles gives us more of the background, "Now Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel. So David said to Joab and to the leaders of the people, 'Go, number Israel from Beersheba to Dan, and bring the number of them to me that I may know it'" (1 Chro. 21:1-2). Census-taking was not sinful of itself (Ex. 30:11-12; Num. 1:1-2), but it was done with the wrong motive.

As *Expositor's Bible Commentary* explains, "Concentrating only on the '*fighting men*' (verses 2,

3 ['troops']) they are not only to count them but also to '*enroll*' them (verses 2, 4) an act with purposes more military *than* statistical."

The JFB Commentary adds, God, though He cannot tempt any man (James 1:13), is frequently described in Scripture as doing what He merely permits to be done; and so, in this case, He *permitted* Satan to tempt David. Satan was the active mover, while God only withdrew His supporting grace, and the great tempter prevailed against the king.

Bible scholar Gleason Archer remarks, "As is his custom, when Satan found the situation ripe for exploitation, he moved in to encourage the desire of David's part and in the hearts of his leaders to carry through the egotistical undertaking, even though General Joab strongly advised against it. It should not be a matter of surprise, therefore, that the totaling up of all the manpower of the Twelve Tribes at the height of their power constrained God to remind them that it was not by their great numbers they would prevail but only by His great grace" (*Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, p. 221).

The census took 300 days, and Joab reported the results to David. "And there were in Israel eight hundred thousand *valiant* men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men" (2 Sam. 24:10). We see here it was clearly the *military* census--to see how mighty was David's potential army, and the total population would be on around six million people.

"And David's heart condemned him after he had numbered the people. So David said, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done, but now, I pray, O Lord, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly'" (24:10). Psalm 19:13 reflects this attitude of repentance.

But it was too late, for God had determined to punish David and Israel for their lack of faith in Him. In the morning, the prophet Gad appeared with God's message to David: "Thus says the Lord, 'I offer you three things: choose one of them for yourself, that I may do it to you.'...Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land? Or shall you flee three months before your enemies, while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days of plague in your land? Now consider and see what answer I should take back to Him who sent me. And David said to Gad, 'I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of

the Lord, for His mercies are great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man” (24:11-14).

David left it in the hands of God, but just asked not to be humiliated by Israel’s enemies. So it turned out to be a plague, and it came the next day. “So the Lord sent a plague upon Israel from the morning till the appointed time. From Dan to Beersheba *seventy thousand men* of the people died. And when the angel stretched out His hand over Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented from the destruction, and said to the angel who was destroying the people. ‘It is enough; now restrain your hand.’ And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. Then David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel who was striking the people and said, ‘Surely I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father’s house. And Gad came that day to David and said to him, ‘Go up, erect an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite’ (24:15-18).

As *Expositor’s* mentions, ‘David’s loving concern for and care of his ‘sheep,’ whether literal or metaphorical, has characterized him from his first appearance in the books of Samuel (1 Sam. 16:11) to his last. Rather than witness the further destruction of his men, he calls the wrath of God down on himself and his own family.’ What humility and courage!

On this higher part of Jerusalem, the angel of God stops. 1 Chr. 21:19-21 says, “So David went up at the word of God which he had spoken in the name of the Lord. Now Ornan turned and saw the angel, and his four sons who were with him hid themselves, but Ornan continued threshing wheat. So David came to Ornan, and Ornan looked and saw David. And he went out from the threshing floor, and bowed before David with his face to the ground. Then David said to Ornan, ‘Grant me the place of this threshing floor, that I may build an altar on it to the Lord. You shall grant it to me at the full price, that the plague may be withdrawn from the people.’”

When Ornan saw the death Angel, he definitely wanted the plague over and was willing to give David this land for free, but David insisted on paying for it.

The Bible says, ‘So David gave Ornan six hundred shekels of gold by weight for the place. And David built there an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, and called on the Lord, and He answered him from heaven by fire on the

altar of burnt offerings. So the Lord commanded the angel, and he returned his sword to its sheath. At that time, when David saw that the Lord had answered him on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, he sacrificed there. For the tabernacle of the Lord and the altar of the burnt offering, which Moses had made in the wilderness, were at that time at the high place in Gibeon. But David could not go before it to inquire of God, for he was afraid of the sword of the angel of the Lord’ (1 Chronicles 21:25-29).

Why was David afraid of the angel’s sword? *The K&D Commentary* explains, “But the fear before the sword of the angel is due to the plague, for it had hindered him from sacrificing at Gibeon, since the sanctuary there, with the Mosaic altar, had it not been spared by the pestilence. David considered this circumstance as normative ever for the future, and he always afterwards offered his sacrifices in the place pointed out to him...He calls the site of the alter in the threshing-floor of Ornan, ‘the house of God, and the altar for the burnt-offering of Israel,’ (1 Chr. 22:1) because there God had manifested to him His gracious presence.”

This threshing floor is on Mount Moriah, where Abraham was prevented from sacrificing Isaac. Notice this insight: “At the same site where *Abraham* once held a knife over his son, *David* sees the angel of the Lord with sword ready to plunge into Jerusalem. In both cases death is averted by sacrifice. The temple is established there as the place where Israel was perpetually reminded that without the shedding of blood there is *no* remission of sin (Heb. 9:22). Death for *Isaac* and for David’s *Jerusalem* was averted because the sword of divine justice would ultimately find its mark in [*Jesus*,] the Son of God (John 19:33)” (Dillard, “David’s Census,” p. 107).

It’s no wonder the New Testament begins with: “The book of the genealogy of *Jesus Christ* the son of *David*, the son of *Abraham*” (Mt. 1:1). They were all linked together in a common destiny to help fulfill God’s wonderful Plan of Salvation for all of mankind. We thus see how unified the whole Bible is, as each theme is interwoven to fill a great pattern.