

2 Samuel 24 • David's Census

Introduction

Not everything that can be defined as “sin” is specifically and exclusively listed in the Ten Commandments or even in that style. Just because something is not “written in stone” does not mean it has a sin-exempt status. How we handle and implement even “good” or “harmless” things can become sin simply because the real problem is our attitude—our pride—in our motivation. Is it for God or really for us? There are many censuses taken throughout the Bible so we know that, in and of their self, a census is not necessarily evil. But why one does it, and the purpose for which the information will be used—**THESE** can become sin. Pride can change the nature of even the most neutral of objects.

¹Now again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, “Go, number Israel and Judah.”

²The king said to Joab the commander of the army who was with him, “Go about now through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and register the people, that I may know the number of the people.”

³But Joab said to the king, “Now 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; but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?” ⁴Nevertheless, the king’s word prevailed against Joab and against the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to register the people of Israel.

⁵They crossed the Jordan and camped in Aroer, on the right side of the city that is in the middle of the valley of Gad and toward Jazer. ⁶Then they came to Gilead and to the land of Tahtim-hodshi, and they came to Dan-jaan and around to Sidon, ⁷and came to the fortress of Tyre and to all the cities of the Hivites and of the Canaanites, and they went out to the south of Judah, to Beersheba. ⁸So when they had gone about through the whole land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. ⁹And Joab gave the number of the registration of the people to the king; and there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men.

[Read v.1-9]

Q: In verse 1, who is the Lord angry at and why?

A: This chapter is loaded with unknowns. No one is quite sure why the Lord is angry at Israel, and whether Israel refers to the whole of Israel, (Judah and the northern tribes) or just the northern tribes. There had been a 3-year famine as recorded in chapter 21, and David, after inquiring of the Lord, discovered that the famine was the result of Saul’s sin against the Gibeonites. But here the reason is some “unspecified sins,” according to most commentators. Personally, I believe that “Israel” refers to the whole nation, but that the Lord was angry specifically at the northern tribes for not being more loyal to David (see 2 Samuel 19:40-43 and subsequently Sheba’s revolt.) The northern tribes tend to buck God’s choices regarding the monarchy.

Q: Re-read verse one, then read 1 Chronicles 21:1. Who incited David?

Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel.

—1 Chronicles 21:1

A: The writer of Chronicles states that Satan moved David to number Israel. Samuel states that it was God. This is not a discrepancy. Satan incited David to take this census, and the Lord sovereignly and permissively used Satan to accomplish His will. Herein may lay the crux of the problem. The issue may be David’s heart. Unlike the God-sanctioned censuses in Numbers, David is not taking the census at the command of the Lord. One of two things might be going on.

- First, the issue may be pride (1 Tim. 3:6). He may be counting up to see what a great army he has, which also becomes an issue of trust; trusting in the size of his army rather than in the Lord.
- The second possibility is that David is taking a census to compare Judah’s strength with Israel (the northern ten tribes). [This is hinted at in the way the final tally is given in v.9, all of Israel versus Judah alone.] This would be blatantly divisive in nature.

In regard to who’s moving David, the resolution is this: David has either pride or rebellion in his heart. God allows Satan to put the thought of taking a census in David’s mind through that avenue. God will use Satan to exact discipline on the nation.

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¹⁰Now David's heart troubled him after he had numbered the people. So 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 acted very foolishly."

¹¹When David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, ¹²"Go and speak to David, 'Thus the LORD says, "I am offering you three things; choose for yourself one of them, which I will do to you.'""

¹³So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, "Shall seven 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 see what answer I shall return to Him who sent me."

¹⁴Then David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the LORD for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man."

¹⁵So the LORD sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning until the appointed time, and seventy thousand men of the people from Dan to Beersheba died. ¹⁶When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented from the calamity and said to the angel who destroyed the people, "It is enough! Now relax your hand!" And the angel of the LORD was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

¹⁷Then David spoke to the LORD when he saw the angel who was striking down the people, and said, "Behold, it is I who have sinned, and it is I who have done wrong; but these sheep, what have they done? Please let Your hand be against me and against my father's house."

Q: In verse 3, what is Joab's reaction, and why?

A: Joab voices his objection to the census, and seems to understand (better than we) that it would be a violation of the Lord's will because it was David calling for the census, not the Lord.

Q: What was David's response in verse 4?

A: He failed to listen. This is uncharacteristic of David, as on so many occasions before he had been willing to listen to the counsel of others (e.g., 2 Samuel 14:21, 19:7-8).

[Read v.10-14]

Q: In verse 10, there is a growth point for David. How does his response in this situation compare with his response to the sin with Bathsheba?

A: Here, he comes to his senses (no pun intended) without first being confronted by a prophet. He repents **before** the prophet gets there.

Q: Why did David choose option three in verse 13?

A: He knew that God's mercy would be greater than man's.

[Read v.15-17]

Q: In verse 15, what was the punishment to David, and to Israel?

A: He lost 70,000 of his troops! This is a double punishment. Both David and Israel are being reproved.

Q: At what point did the pestilence end?

A: When it reached Jerusalem, by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. This passage seems to indicate that the pestilence (plague) was widespread, as it occurred from Dan to Beersheba; that is, the length of the nation, from the northern to the southern ends. Araunah is one of the Jebusites left over after David had taken the rest of Jebus (Jerusalem). Araunah was living outside the fortified city at the northern end of the hill. He had been allowed to stay and work the land for the benefit of the Israelites.

Q: But who initiated the end of the pestilence? What part does David play?

A: God. It's an illustration of His grace in that although we are deserving of judgment for our sin, He relents. God's use of punishment is for discipline in order to make us better, obedient children. God's judgment accomplished what He intended when David truly repented.

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¹⁸So Gad came to David that day and said to him, “Go up, erect an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.” ¹⁹David went up according to the word of Gad, just as the LORD had commanded.

²⁰Araunah looked down and saw the king and his servants crossing over toward him; and Araunah went out and bowed his face to the ground before the king. ²¹Then Araunah said, “Why has my lord the king come to his servant?”

And David said, “To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be held back from the people.”

²²Araunah said to David, “Let my lord the king take and offer up what is good in his sight. Look, the oxen for the burnt offering, the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood.

²³Everything, O king, Araunah gives to the king.” And Araunah said to the king, “May the LORD your God accept you.”

²⁴However, the king said to Araunah, “No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing.” So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. ²⁵David built there an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Thus the LORD was moved by prayer for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel.

[Read v.18-25]

Q: What is God’s instruction to David? How did Araunah respond? And how did David respond to Araunah’s offer?

A: To erect an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah. Araunah wants to give David the land, but David refuses to accept the offer because to offer service that costs him nothing is not sacrifice at all. Sacrifice is an essential part of worship and service to God.

Q: What can we infer from Araunah’s statement in v.23, “May the LORD your God accept you”?

A: It indicates that Araunah’s offer to give David everything for free actually came with a price, the price of Araunah being able to say in the future that he was the one that supplied David’s need. It’s a kind of picture of a false priest attempting to both supply the sacrifice and provide a blessing falsely.

Application: *Repentance is an individual act that requires a personal price.*

Q: What will eventually be located at this site?

A: At this time, the altar associated with the tabernacle of Moses was located at Gideon (we know this from 1 Chronicles). David was instructed by Gad to build another altar to the Lord at this place which would eventually become the site of Solomon’s temple.

Q: What came first—repentance or sacrifices? Why is this significant?

A: David recognized his sin, prayed/repented, **THEN** he offered sacrifices. This is significant because this teaches us the true intent of the Old Testament sacrifices. They were the **END** of the process, not the beginning. They were meant to celebrate and confirm one’s change of heart, not merely be a ritual that allowed one to live however they wanted as long as sacrifices were given.

Q: What other event of significance occurred at this location?

A: [See Genesis 22:1-9.] This is the same location where Abraham offered up Isaac, Mount Moriah.

Make the following applications:

1. What can get us in trouble with the Lord (e.g., Acts 5:1-6)?
2. What is the importance of listening to the wise counsel of others?
3. Do you think David’s punishment would have been more severe if he had not repented?
4. Apply the statement, “I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing.”
5. Apply the issue of the sovereign will of God (the location of the sacrifice from Abraham to Araunah) to God’s working in your own life, and the life of your children and descendants. What is the key ingredient? (Faith.)