

Census: Playing the Numbers Game

2 Samuel 24

By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)

Now let me take a moment to thank the choir for turning out in mass numbers tonight and doing me the honor and privilege of actually hearing this magnificent music that Dr. Wymond wrote. And I was away for your Christmas rendition of it, so thank you so much.

And thank you all for your words of kindness and letters and if you left messages on Facebook I probably haven't seen them but thank you all. I do need to make a word of explanation that the text tonight is not the text I would have chosen to preach my final valedictory sermon. Consider that to be this morning. This just happens, in God's sweet providence, to be the final chapter of 2 Samuel. And we began this series on 1 and 2 Samuel, with a few pauses along the way for other things, but we began in March of 2009 so we've been in these two books and in the lives of Saul and before that Samuel and more recently David for over two years. There've been extraordinary chapters. I preached on these chapters twenty years ago perhaps and forgot all about what I preached then, but once again the extraordinary grace of God in the Gospel that weaves its way through the lives of broken and faulty people like especially King David.

Now these final chapters, let me explain. We've got several visitors. You know if I knew you would come out in the evening service I'd leave more often. (laughter) But it is wonderful to see you here and I'm touched that you should come, but I can't rehearse two years worth of 1 and 2 Samuel but I do need to tell you that in the closing chapters of 2 Samuel something rather odd takes place and about half a dozen stories are just added that look almost like an appendix. But actually, there's a reason they're out of chronological sequence and the author is trying to say some very important theological redemptive historical truths. And in this particular story that contains, as you might expect from these chapters, just some whoppers of difficulties. This is a story about the Gospel. Let's see if we can find the Gospel in 2 Samuel chapter 24 tonight.

Now if you haven't read it in advance and you're not sure what it contains, be prepared for some difficulties, but let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for the Scripture. We thank You for the extraordinary way over two, three thousand years You ordered and maneuvered and guided different people, forty or more different authors in three different languages,

across nations and boundaries, to bring the story of redemption and our salvation together in one Book that is infallible and inerrant that is able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ our Lord, that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. We ask tonight for the blessing of the Holy Spirit to illuminate these words to us, to bring them to life. And we don't want just to understand them — and there are parts of tonight's reading that we may not be able to understand and we want to accept them and to be submissive to them because this is Your Word and we ask for Your blessing. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now hear the Word of God. Final chapter of 2 Samuel:

Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and He incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah." So the king said to Joab, the commander of the army, who was with him, "Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people." But Joab said to the king, "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 it, but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?" But the king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to number the people of Israel. They crossed the Jordan and began from Aroer, and from the city that is in the middle of the valley, toward Gad and on to Jazer. Then they came to Gilead, and to Kadesh in the land of the Hittites, and they came to Dan, and from Dan they went around to Sidon, and came to the fortress of Tyre and to all the cities of the Hivites and Canaanites; and they went out to the Negeb of Judah at Beersheba. So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. And Joab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to the king: in Israel there were 800,000 valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were 500,000.

But David's heart struck him after he had numbered the people. And 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 done very foolishly." And when David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, "Go and say to David, 'Thus says the LORD, Three things I offer you. Choose one of them, that I may do it to you.'" So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, "Shall three 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 decide what answer I shall return to Him who sent me." Then David said to Gad, "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 the LORD sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning until the appointed time. And there died of the people from Dan to Beersheba 70,000 men. 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." 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, "Behold, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father's house."

And Gad came that day to David and said to him, "Go up, raise an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." So David went up at Gad's word, as the LORD commanded. And when Araunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. And Araunah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground. And Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" David said, "To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be averted from the people." Then Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him. Here are the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king." And Araunah said to the king, "May the LORD your God accept you." But the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. And David built there an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the LORD responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.

Amen. May the Lord bless to us that reading of His holy and inerrant Word.

Ah, you see now why I would not have chosen this text as my final text. There are three things here - God's sovereignty, God's mercy, and God's justice; His sovereignty, mercy, and justice. It begins with a puzzle. It's quite a puzzle. It's a mystery. It's difficult. "The anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel." We're not told why the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, perhaps because this is set according to the chiasmic structure — forget about that word; all of the students will know what that means — but there seems to be some link between chapters 24 and chapters 21 which means that perhaps the anger of the Lord here is because of the rebellion of Absalom. We're not told. "The anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and He incited David against them, saying, 'Go, number Israel and Judah.'" Now what David did was wrong. Joab said it was wrong and Joab isn't noted for having written the book on ethics. He didn't have that much of a sensitive conscience, but even he said to the king, "What you're

about to do is wrong.”

Why is it wrong? There've been all kinds of suggestions as to why this numbering, this census, is wrong. In Exodus 30 we're told that when another census was taken a half shekel poll tax, atonement money, had to be paid for every individual in the census and perhaps David did not pay it or have any intention of paying it. Perhaps that's the reason. Josephus, for example, mentioned that as a possibility in the first century. Or perhaps it was the motive of David that was wrong, that he was numbering these people because it would make him look more important. And there are gazillions of sermons on that theme of course, playing the numbers game. You know, folks say to me, “How many are in the church I'm about to go to?” as though if I said, “Fifty” or “Five thousand” my sense of worth and value and importance would alter according to the answer - playing the numbers game. But we've got no evidence that that was the case here. Or perhaps David's motive was unbelief. He wants to know the number of men who can bear the sword because he wants to know the numbers of the army that he can utilize in the coming decades. Perhaps it was unbelief on his part that God's promise couldn't be kept unless he had a certain number. You remember how God played the numbers game, whittling down numbers in the time of the judges. And perhaps David here, the motivation for the census is his unbelief in the promises of God.

Be that as it may, there's a much more powerful problem here. God incites David to do something that is wrong. “He incited David against them saying, ‘Go number Israel and Judah.’” You see the problem. Now the New American Standard Version - this is Ligon's default version. This is Ligon's version that is purportedly the most accurate translation of the Hebrew text, has done something rather nifty here. In translating the Hebrew, what the New American Standard Version says is that it is “God's anger” that incited David. It wasn't God that incited David, it was His anger that incited David; it was David's response to God's anger, in actual fact, David's wrong response to God's anger. And the quotation marks, “Go number Israel and Judah,” is not God saying to David, “Go number Israel and Judah,” but this is David saying, “Go number Israel and Judah.” But we have the ESV, so I can't take that route. (laughter)

So let me assume that the ESV is correct here. What do we do? If you had time, and maybe you will do it — preachers say this all the time but nobody ever really does this. You know, “Go home and check this out.” Someday we're going to do a poll as to how many people actually do that, but let me say, because we don't have that much time — or maybe we do? You know, what's the worst thing you can do to me now? (laughter) If you were to read this text in Chronicles, in 1 Chronicles 21 — Chronicles, you understand, was written many hundreds of years after Samuel. It's written in the time frame of the exile in Babylon when the people of God are beginning to lose doubt, beginning to lose courage, and beginning to doubt the promises of God, so the history of Israel, well, it's written with a particular bent, a particular shape, so as to underline the covenant

promises of God that He had made. And when the chronicler comes to tell this story in Chronicles — you know you're not the first person to see a problem here. You know, never assume that you're cleverer than Bible writers because the chronicler saw that there was a problem and the chronicler says it wasn't God that incited David, it was Satan that incited David. Well now we've got an even bigger problem because it's not just a problem now in Samuel, it's a problem in Chronicles and it seems to be a problem that one text is saying God incites David and 1 Chronicles 21 - and you can look it up, I'm not making this up, it's in 1 Chronicles 21 — Satan, Satan incited David to number the people. So which is it? Is it God or is it Satan? And if it's God, then we also have an ethical problem here. Or do we?

You know, Bible writers, particularly in the early period of the Old Testament, they're not as concerned as we are about levels or causality. It's great preaching a final sermon. You can say anything! (laughter) You know, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter three on the doctrine of the decree says, that everything, absolutely everything, is ordered and ordained by God and yet “God is not the author of sin, nor is violence done against the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.” There are first causes and second causes. God decrees everything but He's not the cause of everything. He - let me put it to you in different language — perhaps we can say God permits sin, even though that sin is against His will. There are different levels of causality here. When Job suffers the terrible things that come upon him, who did it? You know, you might read the book of Job and there are commentaries that suggest that what Job didn't understand was the role of Satan. You know, he got it all wrong because he didn't understand Satan. We are told about Satan in chapters 1 and 2 but that's a little prologue for the reader but Job didn't seem to know about Satan. Would everything have fallen into place had Job simply realized that Satan did it? Until you go back and read the story, and who is it again who says to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job?” It's God. So merely saying Satan did it doesn't remove the problem, and the problem is sovereignty, because in a sense, and in a very special sense — and it has to be a defined sense without making God the author of sin — but in a sense, nothing happens without God willing it to happen and without Him willing it to happen before it happens and without Him willing it to happen in the way that it happens.

So in one sense of the term, God incites David. In other words, God provides the means and the opportunity for David to do wrong. It's a test. From Satan's point of view it is a temptation. God never tempts; He tests. And if you don't know the distinction between testing and tempting you need to go back and read James chapter 1. From one perspective, nothing happens outside the will of God. There are no risks in the providence of God. God's providence is without risk, so in one sense, in an umbrella sense, yes, even the sin of David, it was in the decree of almighty God. And that's what the author of Samuel is saying.

Now, perhaps your problem tonight is not with the ethics. You know, this is a conundrum for seminary students in ethics classes. You could set this in an ethics class, you know, solve this, except that sometimes — you know, did I convince you? Probably not. I know you're endeared to me tonight and you'd probably believe anything I say, but I doubt that I convinced you because sometimes we read Scripture and there are imponderables. It may sound too easy to say but there's a mystery here. And maybe our problem is not so much with the casuistry, the ethics of this passage. The problem is that we feel that God has a duty to explain everything that He does to us. I mean, I heard you saying it as I was reading. I overheard you thinking, "Does God really have a right to do the stuff that He does in this chapter? I mean, come on." You know, here's my valedictory address and there are 70,000 people dead. Farewell. You know, sayonara! I'm out of here! (laughter) You know, perhaps our problem is a more fundamental one. Are you willing, are you willing to be submissive to the sovereignty of God? Do you balk? Do you say, "This isn't fair, this isn't fair. Who is this person anyway? Who does He think that He is? You know, He's acting here as though He's in charge, as though He's God?" Because He is God, and there is a profound, a profound mystery here that nothing, absolutely nothing happens outside of His decree. Sovereignty.

But secondly, there's mercy here too, because in verse 10, David's heart struck him. After they've done this census they go around in an anti-clockwise direction from across the Jordan and up to Dan and all the way down to the Negeb and Beersheba and you have these numbers, 800,000 and 500,000. It's a vast number. It's an impressive number. And then David's heart struck him. Do you remember the line we just sung in one of the hymns that we sang tonight? Remember the phrase, "Tis the Spirit's rising beam"? Don't tell me you've forgotten. We just sang it about fifteen minutes ago. "Tis the Spirit's rising beam." It was a line that was speaking about how the Spirit brings conviction. It's one of the things the Holy Spirit does. He convicts us. What a blessed thing it is when the Spirit convicts you that you've sinned. I have fallen short of the glory of God. A striking of a tender conscience. Bless God when that happens, when God brings you up short, when God brings you down to size and reminds you. You know, when you've grown too big for your boots.

And there's a prophet named Gad. He comes to David in the morning and he gives him three choices — three years of famine, three years of war, or three days of pestilence. Which one do you want? And you want to say, "None. Can I have another choice? Can I try again?" This is a dark place, isn't it? You see, what do you do with that? Do you say, "That's Old Testament. You know, God did things like that in the Old Testament." Or do you say, "That's what sin deserves. What an ugly thing sin is. What an ugly, brutal thing sin is." And you see the holiness of God here. Three days of pestilence or three years of war or three years of famine. And David says something quite extraordinary. "Let us fall into the hands of God." Look at what he says in verse 14. "Let us fall into the hand of the LORD for His mercy is great, but let me not fall into the hand of man."

Perhaps that was ruling out the war option. Let's fall into the hands of the Lord because His mercy is great.

You know what that is? That's theology for dark times and dark places, that however dark it gets, God's mercy is always great. You know, you see yourself as a sinner. Maybe tonight you've come to bid me farewell, but maybe you haven't been at church for a while and maybe your life is a bit of a mess. Let your life fall into the hands of God because His mercy is great. You know what the Bible says — “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” David casts himself upon the Lord and pestilence comes and 70,000 men are dead and then something extraordinary, that the angel of the Lord who's charged with carrying out this act of justice, stops at the threshing floor of Araunah, just short of Jerusalem, just outside of Jerusalem. And the Lord relents. He relents. He says, “Enough.” The mercy of God.

Oh, it's not mercy as the world defines mercy, that's without principle. This is mercy in Bible fashion because along with sovereignty and mercy there's also justice. God says to David, as he begins to plead for Jerusalem and for the sheep that he calls them of Jerusalem, that he's to build an altar and he's to build it in Araunah, on the threshing floor of this man — he's to go and build an altar and sacrifice to the Lord, to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings. And he goes. And Araunah sees the king coming and he does what any king's subject would do — he offers it to him for nothing. And David says, “I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord that cost me nothing.” There's a text to take with you. You know it's easy to be a Christian in Jackson, Mississippi, but does it actually cost you anything, because God wants you. He wants your heart. He wants your life. He wants everything there is about you. And what does David do? How does this extraordinary book of 2 Samuel close? David builds an altar and he offers burnt offerings. And what do we read? The final verse — “David built an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the LORD responded to the plea of the land, and the plague was averted.” Blood was shed and the plague was averted. It's a picture, you understand. It's a picture, that by the shedding of blood there is propitiation. The wrath of God is diverted away.

You know, there's another sacrifice that's going to be offered in a very similar place to this one outside Jerusalem on a hill called Calvary where a Lamb, perfect spotless Lamb, was offered up. The Lamb of God. And the shedding of His blood diverted the wrath of God. Instead of falling upon us, it fell upon Him. You know, I think that's what the writer is trying to say to us. Our salvation does come in David, extraordinary as he was, but there is no salvation in David. It's in great David's greater Son. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just — and just — because God cannot but bless us if we are in Christ. It's the only just thing to do because sin has been propitiated by His blood. You know what this book is saying right at the very end? That atonement can only come through someone else. “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling. Naked look to

Thee for dress, helpless look to Thee for grace. Foul I to the foundation fly; wash me Savior, or I die." Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb tonight? Because if you're not, you need to flee to Him. You need to flee to Him. Cast yourself upon Him because He's full of mercy.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for these books of Samuel. Thank You for pictures of the Gospel. Thank You for its fulfillment in the coming of Jesus. Now bless us, bless us in the knowledge that we are complete in Christ. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.

Now let's — no, no, no — let's stand for the benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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