

The Life of David, 2 Samuel 24, Consequences of Sin and God's Mercy, 11/17/25

Have you ever finished a movie or the finale of a TV series and thought, “Wait...Are you serious, that can't be how it ends!?” You wait for the big happy ending, all the loose ends to be all tied up in a nice bow, and then it ends in a downer, the mystery isn't solved, the guy doesn't get the girl, or the bad guys wins. Think *Planet of the Apes*- Charlton Heston sees the Statue of Liberty buried in the sand and realizes he's living in a dystopian nightmare. Or *Castaway*- Tom Hanks comes back home only to find out his fiancé has moved on and married a dentist named Jerry. (Spoiler Alert).

Well, that may be how 2 Samuel feels when you reach chapter 24. The great story of David—the shepherd boy who slayed Goliath, became king, and united the nation, the man after God's own heart—doesn't end with David riding off into the sunset, or a united family surrounding David at the end of his life. It ends with another colossal failure and a deadly plague. But what appears at first-read to be a terrible ending, I want to show you this morning is the perfect ending because the ending wasn't written for David, it was written for us.

If you are here and you think you are the hero in your own story, your life is an epic tale of success, you make all the right decisions, all the relationships in your life are perfect, and you can't relate to failure, then you might not like this ending...you might as well leave now, I won't be offended. But, if you can ever relate to failure, if you have regrets from bad choices in your life, if you are prone to self-sabotage, you deal with fear, anxiety, uncertainty, doubt about your future and you need God's mercy and some hope today. Well, then I have good news for you, and for me- this is the perfect ending!

David is about 65 now. Israel is secure, the borders strong, the enemies subdued. And then the chapter begins with a shock. *Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them,*

saying, “Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.” Immediately in this verse we are confronted with three head-scratching questions. #1 Why is God angry with Israel #2 Why would God incite David? #3 What's wrong with taking a census?

First Question-Why is God angry with Israel? We don't know. OK let's move on. #2 Why would God incite David, and the implication is to do something he shouldn't do? First we must understand that God never tempts anyone to sin (James 1:13–14). Whatever this means, it cannot be that God is the agent of temptation in David's life.

We get some help in understanding this conundrum in the parallel story about these events in **1 Chronicles 21:1** *Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.* You say, “How does that help? I'm more confused. So who incited David- God or Satan?” And the answer is both. Reading the two accounts together we learn that God's just anger is stirred by some undisclosed sin pattern in David and the nation; Satan is the instrument God uses to expose the sin pattern (maybe that is hidden and needs to come into the light). Now if you are a little

uneasy with that, I am too. But we've seen this dynamic before—with Job, and ultimately at the cross where Satan's evil becomes God's tool for our ultimate good of salvation. **God sovereignly exposes sin and judges; Satan maliciously tempts; David (and Israel) freely sin.**

#3 What's wrong with taking a census? Israel took censuses before. But this one was different. It was a military census—David counting his fighting men.

Most Bible commentaries say that David's census is likely a form of **Idolatry**. "Idolatry? No, that's when you make little wooden statues and bow down to them and worship them." Idolatry goes far deeper than that. Idolatry happens whenever we place our faith, our trust, our confidence, our identity, our security in anything other than God. Our stock portfolio, our educational prowess, our popularity, our beauty and physique, our talent, our social status. Our hearts are idol factories. And so is David's.

David once wrote- ***Psalm 20:7 Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.*** Now, it seems that David is making an idol out of his military prowess. He's placing his trust, his security, his confidence in the might of his army, and drifting from his trust in God.

And possibly, as Tim Keller noted, this was also the beginning of **Empire Building**¹ – a shift from a volunteer army to a standing military for imperialistic conquest, Israel was to be a light to the nations, not an empire like Babylon and Rome. We're not told exactly, but we know this: David shouldn't have done it, and even Joab—of all people—knew it. ***V.3 But why does my lord the king want to do such a thing?*** When Joab, who we've seen be a rascal, selfish, violent...is even seeing why this is a bad idea, you know you are moving in the wrong direction spiritually. David ignores Joab, and moves ahead anyway.

So they take the census of the whole kingdom, it takes about 10 months, about 1M fighting men. And as soon as the census is over he realizes, instead of feeling satisfied and empowered, he says *uh oh*, his conscience is eating at him. ***10 David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD,***

"I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing."

Isn't it interesting that Satan comes along to us and whispers to our desires, "If you do this, you're going to feel so fulfilled. It's what you deserve. It'll bring you such pleasure." And then as soon as you give in, you find it doesn't bring you satisfaction, it doesn't bring you pleasure. It actually leaves you thirstier, more self-loathing, more anxious, worse off than before. Right? This is what David experiences. And to his credit, it's one of the admirable things about David- he humbles himself, he listens to the conviction, he owns his sin and confesses it to God.

¹ <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/david-fails-the-lord/>

And so God says, “You know- you seem genuine...ah- it’s OK, you meant well, no harm, no foul...” Is that what happens? If you know who God is, you know He won’t do that, He can’t do that because he’s far too just. Sin has consequences. Galatians 6- *Don’t be deceived, God cannot be mocked, you reap what you sow*. Your sin, my sin, and David’s sin has consequences.

Curiously, in v.12 God chooses to give David three options for consequences. Now this is the only place in the Bible where God does this. It’s like a bad *Let’s Make a Deal* episode- Behind Door #1 3 Years of Famine, Door #2 3 Months of Invasion, Door #3 3 Days of Plague.

Notice that each judgment strikes at the heart of David’s idols and desire for empire-building: economic strength, military security, or the health of his army and his kingdom. Friends, God in his mercy, will go after our idols so that they lose power in our lives, because he knows they do not deliver what they promise, and instead leave us empty and bring destruction in our lives.

David agonizes over this decision, and finally answers, v.14 *“Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into human hands.”* David, as a man after God’s own heart, knows something important about God’s heart. Many people have a one-dimensional, cardboard cut out version of God. He’s either a judgmental, wrath-filled, spiteful God that’s angry and ready to send lightning bolts to zap everyone. Or a loving God who never judges, and is fine with all our beliefs and the decisions we make as long as we are having a good time, and living our truth. I always say that if you have a god that always agrees with your sensibilities, truths and decisions, then you are likely not to have the real God, just one you created.

But David doesn’t have a shallow view of God. He knows God will judge him and Israel justly, and yet in the end he trusts the mercy of God, that the hand of God to not go all the way. Even though God judges he also has such a strong will to save us and love us, and James 2:13 says, *Mercy triumphs over judgment*. But first judgment- v.15 tells us 70k people, likely soldiers, die from the plague in 3 days. 7% of David’s military wiped out in 72hrs. Now if this is where the story ended, then yes it would be a terrible ending...But this isn’t the end of the story...and our story doesn’t end here either.

16 *When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the LORD relented concerning the disaster*

and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, “Enough! Withdraw your hand.”

The angel of the LORD was then at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. (Now maybe you are like, “There are angels that send plagues, I thought they just guard little babies in their cribs?!” Yes, but that’s a sermon series for another time)

Why did God relent? Look at what it says next. **17** *When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the LORD, “I have sinned; I, the shepherd, have done wrong.*

These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall on me and my family.”

David says, “Spare the sheep and strike the shepherd. Make me the sacrifice.” At last, we see the heart after God’s own heart in David. David says, “I will stand in the gap.” Now God in essence is going to say, “David- your concept is right. Someone has to atone to stop this death, but it’s not going to be you.” He sends a prophet with a message for David.

18 *On that day Gad went to David and said to him, “Go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.”*

A threshing floor was a flat, [Picture] elevated area where grain was threshed—beaten and separated from the chaff by wind. So David tells Araunah that he wants to buy his threshing floor. And Araunah says, let me just give it to you for free. But David knows something important about sacrifice. **24** *But the king replied to Araunah, “No, I insist on paying you for it.*

I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.” David knows that a true sacrifice can never be free, it has to cost something..

25 *David built an altar to the LORD there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings.*

Then the LORD answered his prayer in behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped.

This ends the chapter, and the book, and the life of David in 2 Samuel. “OK Nate, you’re going to have to help me see how this is filled with hope for my life. I haven’t seen these death angels, don’t own a threshing floor and I’ve never built an altar, some help me out. ”

Are you noticing all the correlations to the gospel of Jesus in 2 Samuel? Even though this happened 1000 years before Jesus came to earth- it’s rehearsing the gospel story for us.

1. **Sin deserves God’s just judgment.** God is holy and perfect. Just like David, we all sin, and we fall short of the glory and perfect standard of God, and what sin earns us is just judgment and death, just like death came to the people of Israel.
2. **God is loving and merciful.** David trusts the character of God, that He somehow and some way, will make a way for there to be mercy and hope. And we can trust the character of God too, he’s proven it over and over again in the Bible and our lives, and ultimately in history which brings us to #3
3. **God provides a way of salvation through a sin-substitute** (atoning sacrifice). God says, “David- you and the people deserve death, but I’m going to allow a sin-substitute, an animal to die in your place so that you and the people receive mercy and salvation, not judgment.”

Now here’s what blows my mind and I had not seen before studying this passage again this week. Why did God relent at the threshing floor? Why is it here specifically where God told David to make this sacrifice? Did you know this is the very same location of Mount Moriah where Abraham in Genesis 22 was about to sacrifice his son Isaac (for his sin of disobeying God) when God, in his mercy, provided another sin-substitute (a ram)? And do you know this also becomes the location of Solomon’s temple which becomes the place where all of Israel’s sins

would be atoned for through the perpetual sin-substitution of the animal sacrifices? And then a thousand years later the son of David, Jesus comes to be the good shepherd who becomes the sacrificial lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. And the place where he made the sacrifice? On this same hill, the same place as Abraham, near the same threshing floor, just outside the same temple, as Jesus hung on the cross as the ultimate and final sin-substitute.

God's Mount of Atonement: Abraham's altar → David's altar → Solomon's Temple → Christ's cross.

But that's not all- Just as Isaac was spared after a journey of three days, and Jerusalem was spared after a plague of three days, after three days Jesus rose from the dead, and we are spared eternal death and given eternal forgiveness, grace and life. Are you in awe? See, the Bible is not just a bunch of cobbled together stories- it's one beautifully interwoven tapestry of God's story of salvation. But this story of God's salvation is only good news for us if we receive it. Leads to #4

4. **Salvation comes through faith in God's sin-substitute.** By faith, David trusted in the sin-substitute for salvation. Jesus offers his sacrifice to us, but we must receive it by faith. Have you trusted Jesus, by faith?

Now let's bring it home to us today. Have you blown it? In small ways, big ways—ways you regret? Maybe people warned you, like Joab warned David, and you charged ahead anyway. Do you self-sabotage? You say, "I'm never doing that again." And then like David, you do it again?

Here's what does **not** work: **Self-justification.** "It's not a big deal." "It wasn't really my fault." "That's just how I am." God doesn't dwell in the realm of lies, excuses and half-truths.

Self-pity. "I'm too far gone." "I'm a loser." "God could never love me." "I'll never get past this." That's another lie from the enemy who wants to keep you on the bench and in the pit. God loves us too much to leave us the way we are.

Self-Salvation. David didn't try to do more good deeds to save himself, he didn't try to just be a better person and work harder. He trusted the sin-substitute. And same with us. David isn't the hero of 2 Samuel, and we aren't the hero of the biography of our lives either, Jesus is the hero!

He makes a way for sinners like us to be forgiven, healed, and accepted by God forever. Here's what David did—and what we must do: ABCs of Salvation.

ADMIT David said- "I have sinned greatly." Call your sin what God calls it. No excuses. No spin. Confess to God from an honest heart.

BELIEVE David trusted in the character of God to provide salvation and put his faith in the sin-substitute. We must trust that mercy triumphs over judgment. Stop trusting your own failed attempts to get to heaven, trust that God has provided a way in Jesus to be saved.

CALL David called out to the Lord for his mercy and God answered. The Bible says all those who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

This is the difference between the story of your life having a tragic ending or the perfect, happy ending. Give opportunity to do that today.