

Dr. Robert Chisholm, 1 & 2 Samuel, Session 28, 2 Samuel 24

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This is Dr. Bob Chisholm in his teaching on 1 and 2 Samuel. This is the final session, session 28, David Brings a Plague upon Israel, 2 Samuel chapter 24.

We've come to the end of our study in the books of Samuel and we're going to look at the final chapter of the book, 2 Samuel chapter 24, which I've entitled David brings a plague upon Israel.

And this is not a happy chapter again. So many of the accounts in the books of Samuel are disturbing on various levels and this one is as well. David brings a plague upon Israel.

In the first story in the epilogue, it was Saul's sin that had created problems and David had to serve as kind of royal judge. In this passage, Israel's sin is going to precipitate judgment and David himself is going to commit sin and David is going to end up being sort of a royal priest or mediator. And so, we're going to see in this chapter that when angered by sin, God may severely punish the sinners, but he is willing to withdraw his judgment when sinners repent.

We read in 2 Samuel chapter 24 verse 1, 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. The Lord's anger burned against Israel. We're not given a reason for this.

Was the Lord just arbitrarily getting angry at Israel? I don't think so. When we read that kind of language, usually, always really, elsewhere when it's used, there is a good reason for the Lord to be angry, and it's human sin. There's only one other place in the books of Samuel where the Lord's anger burns against someone.

It's in 2 Samuel chapter 6 verse 7 when Uzzah reached out to touch the ark and violated the holiness of God, the Lord's anger burned against him and the Lord struck him down dead. But on that occasion, we understand there was good reason from the Lord's perspective for his anger to flare up. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, when the Lord's anger burns against his people, invariably it is due to sin.

And if you trace that phrase through the Old Testament, you'll see it shows up in Exodus and Numbers and Deuteronomy and Joshua and Judges, 2 Kings, Isaiah. In all of these cases where the Lord's anger burns against someone, blatant rebellion, often in the form of idolatry, is the sin that prompts this divine wrath. So, we can assume when we read the first half of verse 1 that the anger of the Lord burned against Israel because Israel had sinned in some way.

We're not told how. And then the Lord does something that seems very odd. He incited David against them.

So, he's going to incite David to do something that in turn is going to bring judgment upon the nation. And he incites David to go and take a census, to go around and count how many warriors he has. By David's own admission later in the chapter, David is going to recognize that this was a sinful thing to do.

It was wrong to do this. And so, you can't get around the fact here that the Lord, in his judgment upon Israel, prompts David to do something that was wrong. I don't know about you, but that kind of disturbs me because it seems to go against this idea that God doesn't tempt people to sin.

James tells us that. But sometimes when he is implementing judgment against people, he will resort to this kind of thing. This word that's translated incited, it's used in some interesting ways elsewhere in the Old Testament, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively.

It's used by a daughter, Aksah, who charms her father, Caleb, to give her a present in Judges chapter 1. Like daughters are want to do sometimes. They have the ability to charm their daddies into giving them something. It's used of riches enticing a person in Job 36.

It's also used by one person persuading or inciting another person to follow a certain course of action in many texts. It's used negatively by a prophet enticing people to worship idols in Deuteronomy 13. It's used by Satan, oddly enough, inciting God to test Job in Job 2:3. The Lord actually says to Satan, rebuking him, you have incited me, uses this verb, you have me against my servant Job.

And that's almost an accusation on God's part there. When God is the subject of the word elsewhere, it's used positively of God drawing an enemy away from Jehoshaphat, King Jehoshaphat of Judah. The Lord incited the enemy, drew the enemy, and persuaded the enemy to go in a different direction.

It's also used of God wooing or attempting to lure people from destruction to blessing in Job 36. Elihu uses it that way. So, it really has the idea of persuading someone, and translated incited here.

So, the Lord, as part of his judgment against Israel, as he's angry, persuades David to take a census. And it's beyond our discussion today to talk about how this can be fair. But the Lord decides, in judging sinners sometimes, to maybe not be so fair.

It's all part of his justice. Now some people resolve this problem by going to the parallel text in 1 Chronicles. There is a passage in 1 Chronicles 21 that covers the same ground, but it's a little bit different.

And it says in 1 Chronicles 21.1, the NIV translates, Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel. No reference to the Lord's anger or anything like that. And so, some people will say, see really it was Satan who did this.

But I find that problematic and here's why. Because in the Hebrew text of this passage, the word Satan is used, which eventually becomes a proper name used of Satan. But in the Old Testament, when Satan is used, all Satan means is an adversary or an enemy.

And when it's used in the Old Testament without a definite article, in other words, it's not ha. Ha is the definite article in Hebrew. It's not ha-Satan, the adversary.

It's just Satan, an adversary. And when it's used without the article elsewhere in the Old Testament, it doesn't refer to Satan. It refers usually to a human adversary.

There's one place where the angel of the Lord is the adversary in Balaam's situation when he appears. He's called an adversary in that text. When Satan is referred to in the Old Testament, and he's not referred to in the Old Testament very often, the article is used.

In Job 1 and 2, he is ha-Satan. He is the adversary. It's a title.

This is also the case in the Zechariah passage where Satan is referred to. So based on usage in the Old Testament, I would think that Chronicles is simply talking about an adversary. Maybe the Moabites, the Edomites, or some kind of nearby people, an adversary incited David to number the people.

And I still have to put it together with 2 Samuel 24. I can't just trump 2 Samuel 24 and pretend it doesn't exist. I've got to bring the Chronicles passage together with the Samuel passage.

Okay, the anger of the Lord burned against Israel and he incited David against them. Bringing the Chronicles text in, I would say he used it as his instrument to incite David, an adversary nearby. Even if you insist on Chronicles, while Chronicles is relatively late, maybe by that time Satan is being used as a proper name.

And so, we could translate Satan. It would be the only place in the Old Testament where that would be the case. Even then, I don't think God's off the hook on this because Satan would simply be his instrument in inciting David.

No matter what you do with the first Chronicles passage, I don't think it solves your problem with 2 Samuel 24. The anger of the Lord burned against Israel and he incited David against them. Samuel makes no mention of any Satan.

And so, whether it's Satan, I don't think it is, or a human adversary, that would be my preference in Chronicles, that's simply the instrument. The Lord is the one who is orchestrating all of this. So, David goes and takes a census.

And the king says to Joab and the army, I want you to go through all the tribes from Dan to Beersheba and enroll the fighting men because I want to know how many there are. Joab immediately is uncomfortable with this. And he says to David, may the Lord your God multiply the troops a hundred times over.

May we have a big army. May many Israelite young men be born and become part of the army. And may the eyes of my Lord the King see it.

But why does my Lord the King want to do such a thing? Why are you wanting to do this? And I think clearly it smacks of a lack of faith. In other words, I trust the Lord for security, but by golly, I want to see how much money is in that account. I want to see how many soldiers I have.

He seems to be walking by sight, not by faith. It looks very Saul-like, quite frankly. The king's word, however, overruled Joab and the army commanders.

And they left the presence of the king to enroll the fighting men of Israel. We then read about how they went throughout the entire land, all the way up to the north and then back around. And after they'd gone through the entire land, they came back to Jerusalem, and it took nine months and 20 days for all of this to take place.

And Joab reported the number of the fighting men to the king. And it's a very large number from Israel and Judah. And then in verse 10, we read David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men.

And he says to the Lord, I have sinned greatly in what I have done. David realizes that he has done wrong. Now, it was the Lord who incited him to do this as part of his judgment on Israel.

But he says, now, Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing. The language that was used earlier for Saul.

And so, as we said, David is looking a bit Saul-like here. Before David got up the next morning, the word of the Lord had come to Gad the prophet. Gad the prophet is going to enter the picture, and he is told, go and tell David this is what the Lord says.

I'm giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you. It doesn't look to me as if the Lord answers David's prayer for forgiveness here.

He comes with a message, well, judgment is coming. You get to pick your poison. So, Gad goes to David, and he lays out the three options that David can choose.

Shall there come on you three years of famine? That's the way the NIV translates it. Actually, the Hebrew text has seven years of famine. The Septuagint goes with an alternate reading three, but I think the Septuagint may just be conforming the number to the number that's used in the next two options.

So, I tend to think of seven as probably being the original reading here. Seven years of famine in your land, or you can have three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you. So, you, David, can be chased around as Saul chased you around for three months by enemies.

Of course, that would have implications for the nation, because if the king is in such a vulnerable place that he's going to be pursued, that means the nation is being invaded, and it would have negative repercussions for Israel. Or three days of plague in your land. We can get this over quickly.

We can have a very severe plague, devastating plague. It'll only last three days, and we can be done with it. Now then, think it over.

Decide how I should answer the one who sent me. So, it appears as if the Lord is not going to just forgive David and wipe the slate clean, because remember, it's not so much the sin that David committed, it's the sin that Israel committed that incited the Lord's anger in the first place. It's not just a matter of the Lord punishing David here.

It's the Lord intending to punish Israel. So, David says in verse 14 to Gad, I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great.

But do not let me fall into human hands. So, I think David here is ruling out option number two. I don't want to be chased around by enemies, human enemies.

I would rather just deal directly with the Lord because the Lord has great mercy. And David uses a word here that refers to divine emotion. It's the feeling of mercy.

It's the feeling that a brother has for another brother. Joseph felt this when he saw Benjamin. It's the feeling that a mother has for her child.

And so, David is saying, even though the Lord seems to have not granted his request for forgiveness, David says the Lord's mercy is great. I'd rather deal directly with him. He may be merciful and who knows, give us a reduced sentence.

I think that's what David may be hoping for. So, it seems as if David is saying, I don't want that second option. I don't want to have to deal with human instruments.

Let's go with famine or plague. And the Lord chooses the plague, verse 15. So, the Lord sent a plague on Israel from that morning until the end of the time designated, is what the traditional text says.

There is an alternate reading that says from morning until dinner time. So, is this just day one of the three-day plague, or is this a summary of what happened throughout the time of the plague? Not sure. And 70,000 of the people from Dan to Beersheba died, a large amount of people all the way from north to south.

So, this is a devastating plague, some kind of a disease or whatever that just began to kill people. And 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. If the time of the plague is already over, then this seems like it would be excessive.

And that's why some people want to read from morning until dinner time back in verse 15. But I think what happens here, beginning in the second half of verse 16, there is a flashback. And so, the plague has been devastating the land for three days and now the Lord is ready to finish with Jerusalem, as it were, and then he just relents concerning the disaster and tells the angel, withdraw your hand.

Beginning in verse 16b, we have a flashback and we get a little more detail about why the Lord relented. And true to form, the Lord is proving to be merciful in this context. David was right.

Well, I'd rather take my chances with the Lord because he's a merciful God. So, a flashback in 16b. Now, the angel of the Lord was at the threshing floor of Arunah, the Jebusite.

And when David saw the angel, so David was given the ability to see the Lord's angel, who is the Lord's instrument of destruction here, 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 really doesn't understand fully what's going on here. He understands that he has sinned and he thinks that the nation is paying for what he has done.

Actually, if you go back to verse 1, the way we read it, that's not the case. The judgment, the primary target of God's judgment is Israel, the nation. They were the ones that incited him to anger.

The thing with David is part of the judgment upon Israel. So, David's perspective is limited here. 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 Arunah, the Jebusite.

So, the prophet comes and says, you've confessed your sin and you need to build an altar. So, David went up as the Lord had commanded through Gad. And when Arunah looked and saw the king and his officials coming toward him, he went out and bowed before the king with his face to the ground.

And Arunah said, why has my Lord the king come to his servant? And David tells him, I want to buy your threshing floor so I can build an altar to the Lord so that the plague on the people can be stopped. So David is going to serve as an intercessor for the people. And as Gad instructed, he wants to do it here at Arunah's threshing floor.

Interesting that in verse 21, a different word for plague is used. The earlier word focused on the devastating nature of the plague. Here a different word is used than what was used in those earlier verses.

This is *deber*. And the term is used for the plague that tormented the Philistines when they took the ark back in 1 Samuel 6. But then in other passages, it describes more the mass slaughter of human beings. So, this term seems to draw attention to the mass destruction of human life that's brought by the plague, whereas that other term seems to focus more on the punitive nature of the plague as a punishment.

Plague as punishment. This is a plague of mass destruction. And so, David is saying, I need to build an altar to the Lord so I can intercede on behalf of the people so that this mass destruction can be stopped.

And Arunah said to David, well let my Lord the king take whatever he wishes and offer it up. Here are oxen for the burnt offering and here are threshing sledges and ox yokes for wood to start the fire. Your majesty, Arunah gives all this to the king.

And Arunah also said to him, may the Lord your God accept you. So Arunah just wants to give David what he needs as a gift. But David feels like, no, that's not appropriate.

I insist on paying for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord, my God, burnt offerings that cost me nothing. There needs to be some cost here in this to demonstrate my sincerity.

I'm not taking handouts in this case. Thanks, but no thanks. So, David bought the threshing floor and the oxen and paid 50 shekels of silver for them.

So, David has paid a price here. And then he built the altar to the Lord and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. And then the Lord answered his prayer on behalf of the land and the plague on Israel was stopped.

So, I think this is what happened back in verse 16 when we heard about the Lord telling the angel, to stop. And then we get this account that gives us the backstory on that and fills in the gaps and lets us know it was because of what David did as a royal priest, as it were. He interceded on behalf of the people and that's what prompted the Lord to just cease bringing the plague full force upon Jerusalem.

And so, we see David functioning in that role for the people. So, as we wrap up our study, I think we can see a couple of important principles that emerge here. God's punishment of sin is sometimes very severe.

Even when sinners beg for forgiveness, you can't get around that here. This episode mirrors the Bathsheba incident to some degree. David humbly confessed his sin, but he still suffered sin's painful consequences.

The portrait of an angry and deceptive deity who relents only after slaughtering a massive amount of people is frightening in the extreme. It doesn't tend to attract us as readers to God, but if we assume as we should that he was justified in his response to Israel's sin in the first place, the divine perspective has to replace our own as certain truths become clear. God hates sin and he hates sin and he is not going to tolerate it.

And we need to come to grips with that. And he's perfectly justified in punishing sinners. And it's a lesson in patience and mercy that we don't read of such severe judgment more often than we do in the pages of scripture.

Because David said it right in the middle of the story, I'd rather deal with God, he's merciful. So even in the midst of this, David brings out this theme of mercy. And realizing how sin activates divine anger and judgment, I think we gain a greater appreciation for what the outpouring of God's wrath upon his son entailed.

I think sometimes people will look at the crucifixion, why did Jesus have to suffer so? Well, what you see in the physical suffering is just the tip of the iceberg. Jesus is taking our sin upon himself. And the brutality that we see there is just a reminder that God hates sin and he's pouring out his judgment upon Jesus.

And until we really come to grips with that reality, I don't think we're going to be able to present the gospel the way we should. I do evangelism every year at the state fair. I talk to dozens of people about the gospel.

And I try to get them to see the gravity of their situation, that they have violated God's standards. They are sinners in his sight and they deserve nothing but divine punishment. And until you come to grips with that, until you humble yourself and see yourself as a sinner who deserves nothing, you're not going to appreciate what Jesus did.

Jesus took the penalty, the punishment for sin upon himself so that we can be redeemed. And so, a passage like this is frightening, but it's a good reminder of what we've been delivered from through the Lord Jesus Christ. And another very important principle that we see here is the Lord is indeed compassionate and he's willing to soften his punishment when sinners approach him properly.

Yes, initially he does not accept David's confession and request for forgiveness. No, the punishment has to come. He gives David the opportunity to choose which option and there's actually a little bit of mercy in that.

And then as things begin to unfold and David sees the judgment heading toward Jerusalem, he goes before the Lord and he cries out for mercy and the Lord does show compassion and stops short of pouring his judgment out fully upon the city. We see this elsewhere in the Old Testament in Lamentations chapter 3, from which we get our hymn. Thomas Chisholm, my namesake, wrote a hymn, Great is Thy Faithfulness.

Morning by morning new mercies I see. That's actually rooted in Lamentations 3 and if you read the book of Lamentations, these are laments that are being offered up to God in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem. Surrounded by the sights and sounds of judgment and death, which he describes in graphic detail, the author, maybe Jeremiah, is able to say in Lamentations 3.22, that because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed by his compassions never fail.

And then he says, though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. So even when God has to pour out his judgment, we see his compassion very often. And then of course there is Hosea chapter 11, where God kind of pulls aside the veil and lets us look into his heart.

And in Hosea 11, he's recalling how he had brought his son Israel out of Egypt and cared for his son. Anybody who has raised children can appreciate what the Lord is saying. The Lord thinks back to the early days.

But then what did Israel do? They went after the Baal idols, and their idolatry is described in the book of Hosea in graphic detail. They turned away from the Lord and the Lord had no alternative but to bring judgment upon them. If you're going to worship Baal and think that he is the source of your blessings, well I can't let that happen.

I've got to get your attention through judgment. And he is angry and he is bringing judgment upon Israel and he's describing this judgment in Hosea chapter 11. But then all of a sudden, there's a change in tone.

As the Lord pours out his judgment upon his wayward people, his heart is changed within him. It's turned over upon him. And all his compassions are aroused.

And it prompts him to relent from sending his judgment. He asks the question, how can I possibly make you like Sodom and Gomorrah? I can't do that. I can't go that far.

And so, he has compassion. And then he says because I am God, not man. Human beings sometimes get blinded with rage.

They can't control their emotions and they just pour their anger out upon others. But God isn't like that. He's committed to his people.

And he has compassion. And so, in the midst of pouring judgment out upon human beings, he is able to stop and temper his anger with compassion. He holds his emotions in perfect balance, unlike human beings.

So, we see this theme elsewhere in the Old Testament. A frightening passage, 2 Samuel chapter 24. But also, a passage where we see God stopping short of the judgment that he intended to pour out, demonstrating his compassion.

And we also see that compassion in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem in Lamentations 3. And we see it in Hosea 11, where God shares with us what he's feeling and the conflict of emotions that he's feeling. And I think anyone who has had a prodigal child can certainly relate to what God says there. The anger, the disappointment that God feels toward Israel, but yet the compassion as well.

So, with that, we conclude our studies here in the books of Samuel. I hope you have found it rewarding. I would encourage you to read the text over and over again in your future Bible study, because every time we read these biblical texts, they're intended to be read more than once.

Every time that I read them, I find something new, a further insight into the character of God, a further insight into how we are to relate to him. So I hope you've enjoyed your studies, and I wish you the best, and let's conclude in prayer.

Father, we thank you for your compassion. We worship you as the great sovereign God. We recognize that you are a holy God who must judge sin, but we also understand that you are a compassionate God who provides forgiveness and relents from sending your judgment in full force. We thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ,

through whom we have redemption, and through whom we can have a relationship with you.

We've read a lot about David, and we recognize that it's the Lord Jesus Christ who is the ideal king to come. He is the one through whom you will fulfill your promises to David, to Israel, and ultimately to the human race. We thank you that you are redeeming a people for yourself and that we can be part of this through our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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