

The Perplexing Wrath of God

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Date: 01 October 2017

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[0 : 00] 2 Samuel chapter 24.

Again, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, I Go number Israel and Judah.

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 Aor and from the city that is in the middle of the valley toward God and on to Jazar.

Then they came to Gilead and to Gadesh and 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 Negev 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.

[1 : 41] 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 answers 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.

[2 : 48] 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 against or among the people, It is enough now.

Stay your hand. And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Erunah, 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 God came that day to David and said to him, Go up, raise an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Erunah, the Jebusite.

So David went up at Gad's word as the Lord commanded. And when Erunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. And Erunah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground and 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 Erunah said to David, Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him.

[4 : 02] 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, Erunah gives to the king. And Erunah said to the king, May the Lord your God accept you.

But the king said to Erunah, 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 50

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. Okay, so have you ever been in a situation, and maybe it was you, or it was somebody who you were with, and they were wronged in some way.

Could have been something small or a little bit more of a bigger deal. And they were upset about it, but they kind of took it to a level that you thought was too extreme.

You know, like maybe their food came out. You're at a restaurant with them, and their food came out, and it was undercooked. And so, you know, they sent it back, but instead of just sending it back, they made a big site like they, I don't know, they flipped the table over or something.

[5 : 17] Get that stuff out of here. How dare you, right? So I think we've all been in a situation like that where we've thought that a person, yeah, you were wrong, but I think you're taking it to a level that is unnecessary.

And there are times where I think people come to a text like this one, and they have this feeling towards God that maybe he took it a little bit farther than was necessary.

But here's the thing. God never is embarrassed or shows any kind of embarrassment or any kind of shame over his wrath because of his judgment.

And so since he's not embarrassed by it, neither should we be when we see God acting justly towards sinners. People read instances like this in the Bible, and they think, God, why did you have to do that?

We all know that person who takes, again, the things a little bit too far, and maybe they were right in being upset, but they seemed like it was overreacting. And so they feel embarrassed. And so while this might perplex us, it shouldn't embarrass us, nor should it make us disappointed in God, because, again, he is God, and we are we, right?

[6 : 29] So we are not in a position where we are able to judge God because, again, God is holy, perfect, and righteous, and we are not.

So the first thing I want us to see is the perplexing wrath of God in verse 1. Again, it says, The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited Israel and Judah.

This first verse is filled with difficult questions, some of which we can't fully answer, but others we must consider. There are two things here that we can't know. Two things we can't know.

First, we cannot know precisely when this occurred except that it happened while David was king. And there is reasonable argument to make that it happened in his later days because it says there again, and that suggests at least some earlier occasion in which the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people of Israel.

So we can't know precisely when this happened during David's reign. And the second thing we also can't know is the reason for the Lord's anger on this occasion.

[7 : 35] You see, there's no explanation given for his anger. So that suggests that we don't know why the Lord's anger was kindled, but it is very important for us to understand that the Lord's anger was kindled.

Something happened. God wasn't just, you know, having a case of the Mondays. He wasn't in a bad mood and thought, you know, I'm going to smite people today to make me feel better. Something had happened.

And he certainly had reason to show his wrath in this way. And God is never unjustified in what he does.

And so on this occasion, there must have been something that happened that caused God's anger to be kindled against the people of Israel. Some kind of sin that they had committed.

And again, all sin is committed against God. The information in verse 1 is made known to us, the reader, although it was not known at this stage to any of the human participants in what follows.

[8 : 36] No one was aware that the Lord's anger had been kindled against Israel. We can see that now as the reader, but they didn't know at the time they were going through it. What the Lord did in his anger is a puzzle that reverberates through the whole chapter when it says, He incited David against Israel.

David was to be the unsuspecting agent of the Lord's anger against Israel. And there's a parallel between against Israel and against them in this verse that clearly indicates that what David was to do would hurt Israel.

The account is also mentioned, this account is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 21, verse 1, where, if you remember, it says that Satan was the one who incited David.

So that might sound like a contradiction, but in reality, it's not. Because, as Martin Luther famously said, the devil is God's devil.

When we understand that even Satan serves the Lord's purposes, putting the text together, the one we read and the one in 1 Chronicles, we can say that the Lord used Satan as his agent in inciting David to be the agent of his anger against Israel.

[10:01] All right. That is something worth chewing on, is it not? So let's chew on it a little bit. And so when it comes to these difficult questions, or when this happens and we think, wow, that definitely seems like that's what Scripture says, but how can that be?

There's two options here. One is dualism. So if Satan operates outside of God's control, then he's like an equal with God in a way.

So it's kind of like that yin and yang, that black and white. You know, we've got a good guy, we've got a bad guy. Who's going to win? I don't know. Hopefully the good guy wins, right? You see that in a lot of stories that we have.

We can go, you know, I like Star Wars, so you've got the light side and the dark side. I mean, we see it all over. So if that's the reality, if Satan is not under God's power and control, then he is an elevated being.

But we know that that's not the case. He's created by God. And he was created, if you remember, as Lucifer, an angel who was beautiful, who fell as a result of his own sin that was taking place within himself.

[11:22] He fell. And so the devil is God's devil. Let's chew on that a little bit more because I think when we come to these difficult kind of questions, the easy thing would be to do, well, he's just, Pastor said he's God's devil, so let's just keep on going, right?

No, but to really seek answers, and I think God always invites us to do that in his word. And so what I like to do on difficult passages such as this one or difficult questions that we might have in dealing with an issue such as this is to turn to somebody who's a lot smarter than me.

And so I am turning to R.C. Sproul. And so I want to read an article that he wrote, a brief article about this. And so he writes, Amen.

Thank God. Though he created the devil, God is not in any way culpable for evil. Like everything else, Satan was originally very good.

And how Satan could fall when there was no evil present in creation is a great mystery. Still, we know our creator cannot be tempted with evil, nor can he ever tempt anyone.

[13:11] James 1.13 That Satan is a creature means he is subject to the Lord who uses him to fulfill his good purposes. Romans 8.28 In the final analysis, the devil is God's devil, to summarize Martin Luther, and never operates outside the Lord's decree.

This truth can be seen when we compare today's passage with 2 Samuel 24. Applying material from the books of Samuel to the Israelites after the Babylonian exile, the chronicler tells us Satan incited David to take a census of Israel.

Even though 2 Samuel 24 verse 1 says God moved David on that occasion. This is no contradiction. It illustrates the doctrine of providence. Since God is sovereign over all, everything that happens is grounded in his plan.

David commanded a census because the Lord ultimately planned that he do so, but Satan was used as the secondary cause to incite David. God ordained David's sin, but he is not to blame for the temptation, for Satan did the tempting.

In this case, we might say the Lord allowed Satan to tempt David in order to clarify the point that God does not stand behind evil deeds in the same way that he does behind goodness.

[14:34] But make no mistake, John Calvin tells us, God's decree of evil is not bear permission as if God sat in a watchtower awaiting chance events, and his judgments thus depends upon human will.

And he continues on. That God rules over Satan without himself being guilty of sin is a hard truth, but it is also comforting. It tells us that what we suffer from the devil, his demons, and all evil is not purposeless, but will lead to our good and God's glory.

God is much greater than we are, so he is able to do things that we could never do, such as being sovereign over the devil without ever being guilty of the devil's evil. Knowledge of this truth should

not only move us to glorify the Lord, but also be confident that every tragedy we meet will serve a good purpose when all is said and done.

If you are going through a difficult time, know that God is using it for your good, even if you cannot see how. God is able to use both good and evil acts for his purpose without any way diminishing human responsibility for the deeds themselves.

There are a number of examples of this in Scripture. So, let's look at a couple of those examples. Genesis 50. If you remember, Joseph and his brothers who intended to kill him, right?

[15:56] And he says to them, after, you know, rising, after going all through he went through, rising to be the right-hand man of Pharaoh, he says to them, As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.

So, again, their actions were evil, but God was involved in bringing good out of that evil. Another example would be of Peter. Peter said of the crucifixion of Jesus, This Jesus, in Acts chapter 2, he said, This Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

So, the killing of Jesus was a wicked act for sure, which these lawless men were responsible, you and I included, right? Yet, it is also according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God that this happened.

Divine sovereignty does not diminish human responsibility. Neither does human responsibility diminish sovereignty. The Lord had a purpose in what he incited David to do without compromising David's responsibility for what he did.

So, what did the Lord incite David to do? We see there, to go and to number Israel and Judah. So, in the context of the whole chapter, it seems that this was not given to David as a verbal command, but that David was incited from within himself, right?

[17:22] He decided that he was going to do this. The difference may seem slight, but in a little while, we will see that David did not see the numbering of the people as something that the Lord had commanded him to do.

From David's point of view, it was his idea for which he rightly took full responsibility, as we will soon see. And so, as we continue on here, when we go back to the question that we've just dealt with, I want to encourage you that if that answer was not sufficient, let's talk about it, and let's work together till you feel the answer is sufficient.

And some of these things, you know, we will, there are, there's a lot of things, actually, not some. It's going to require us going to heaven to completely get it all, right? We're talking about free will, we're talking about sovereignty, we're talking about election.

How's this all come together? The Bible says clearly what it says. Well, when we get there, we're like, oh, okay, I get it, right? Just like when Jesus, when he was resurrected, he was walking with the two guys and he opened their minds to be able to understand scripture like they hadn't before, we'll get there one day.

But that doesn't mean that we should, again, come to those types of things and just say, well, we'll just, we'll find out in heaven. So, you know, who cares? It doesn't matter, yeah? But we need to talk about that.

[18:38] So if you still have questions, I always like to have those types of conversations and I'll try to help you as much as I can. But it's good that we do that. Okay, so, it is not obvious why numbering the nation would be against them.

In our experience, we have census. We do them every 10 years and for the most part, it's not that difficult to do, right? You fill out a little form and mail it back to them.

It's not a huge deal and the purpose of taking the census is for good. It's for the good of our communities, right? But this was not the case in the ancient world.

Taking a census would have various unwelcome purposes, including for taxation and for military recruitment. So if you lived during this time and you saw that the census or heard that the census was gonna be taken, that's not something that you were looking forward to, right?

Because it meant that, you know, government's gonna get deeper in your pockets or your husband and sons were about to potentially be sent off to war for who knows how long. A ruler's numbering his people would certainly be ominous as it was 1,000 years later when Caesar Augustus ordered a census of the whole Roman world in Luke 2, verse 1.

[19:54] It still seems puzzling that the consequences of the Lord's anger being kindled against Israel was that David was stirred up to conduct a census. So in verses 2 and 4, we see the

contentious command of the king.

David, presumably unaware of the Lord's hand in it, instructed Joab to carry out his wish. And we see that in verse 2. He calls him and he tells him about his plan. And Joab, being who he is, never too shy to express his own opinions and probably knowing what this is gonna mean, right?

He was doing this for nine months plus. And so he's telling David, basically, maybe we don't need to do this, right?

Hey, I hope that the people grow and that you're satisfied with what you see, but maybe our time could be spent better doing something else.

But David was convinced that this is what he wanted to have done and he was going to have his way. And so it says that the king's word prevailed and so they were sent to number the people in verses 4 through 9.

[21 : 06] There follows an account of their itinerary in verses 8. As Joab and the men go out and the project took nearly again 10 months to complete, Joab and his men returned to Jerusalem and they brought the results to the king.

And they were large numbers, 800,000 valiant men who drew the sword and the men of Judah were 500,000. Their numbers seem very high and that would, if these numbers are accurate, it would imply a total population of at least 6 million people in the land.

However, what's interesting is in the Hebrew, the word for 1,000 was also a word that was used for a military unit. And so it has been suggested that such units were quite smaller and maybe would have consisted to 5 to 14 men in a unit.

And if that's the case, the numbers would be a lot smaller and more easily for us, easier for us to understand because this is a lot of people we're talking about back in a time where their population of the world wasn't nearly what it is today.

In terms in which the report was brought to the king revealed that at least one purpose of the numbering was to ascertain the nation's military capability. So we see that was at least one of the things that David was trying to figure out.

[22 : 21] And then in verses 10 through 15, we see the wrath of God and the pestilence of Israel. Verse 10 is the most perplexing development in this puzzling sequence of events.

It says there, 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 again, we don't know what it was that caused David to be stricken in this way. All we know is that David understood that what he had done in calling for this to happen was sin and that he had sinned greatly against the Lord and he was seeking the Lord's forgiveness.

And so, I will share a personal story that I hope will be embarrassing to me but will, I think, help you better understand. When I first became a pastor, I took over for our previous senior pastor who retired and he was about 63 years old and he had been in ministry serving as a pastor for over 30 years.

And so, I had been at our church for one year and during that time, I graduated from, I was hired as youth pastor. I graduated from seminary. Then they kept me on and they gave me the title of associate pastor.

[23 : 36] And then when our senior pastor retired, they asked me to come and be the senior pastor. And so, there was, and I accepted, and there was some concern.

And rightly so. I was concerned. They were like, well, you know, Pastor Blaine, who I love dearly still and who is a great man and is a great pastor, he was a great, he knew what he was doing and so there was some concern.

You know, hey, we've got a guy who has been doing this for over 30 years and we've got a guy who's never been a senior pastor. And so, there was some concern about how this would go for the church financially.

Will people leave? Will our finances decrease? And so, there was some real concern expressed by the leadership. Not that they were, you know, regretting, I guess, the decision, but they just were, you know, hey, let's think about what the unintended consequences might be.

And I agreed with them but then there, you know, the church did well and so, I started keeping track of our attendance and I was comparing it to the last year there and as the numbers, you know, would increase, oh, you know, we weren't, you guys weren't so bad and make, but then God

thankfully brought that to my attention and I realized and I put an end to it because I thought, you know, this is, this is dumb and, you know, it's not doing any good for anybody and ultimately it's God who brings people if that's the case and so, I was very much convicted of that and I don't do that anymore because, you know, numbers are great but we're after something much more important in the church and we're after people.

[25 : 30] One, you know, knowing Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior but then helping and equipping them to serve and what he's asked them to do and helping them to grow spiritually and more like Christ and you can't really, you can't really put a number on that, right?

So, maybe David was, when I read this, I think maybe he was kind of doing the same thing, you know, and he's forgetting about the fact that he was just this ruddy, stinky, dirty little shepherd boy who Samuel thought, no way, is this going to be the next king but God said, yeah, this is the guy and maybe he had forgotten at this point in time where he came from and so, he needed a good reminder himself of all that God had done in his life and so, in verses 11 through 13, we see the word of the Lord.

This all began with the Lord's anger being kindled against Israel and David's census, whatever his personal and sinful intentions may have been, had another purpose, the outworking of the Lord's anger against Israel, the word of the Lord then came but it was not what the word, it was not the word that David had hoped for.

So, verses 11 through 12, David understands, I've done bad and he's asking for forgiveness but then it says, 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, these three things I offer you, choose one of them that I may do it to you and then in verse 13, we see that Gad comes to him and he gives them these three options and they're all terrible, right?

Three years of famine or three months of you running before your foes while they pursue you or three days of pestilence in your land, now consider and decide what it is I'm going to do to you.

[27 : 22] So, this is very severe and the question arises, well, why did the Lord involve David in this unusual way? He's not done that before it seems.

Why didn't he just send one of his punishments, right, that he had chosen as soon as his anger was kindled against Israel? Why didn't he just go ahead and say, you know what, I'm going to punish you in this way.

Again, we don't have answers to these questions but we can observe that one effect of what the Lord did was to involve David in the judgment of his people and to demonstrate that David, King David, the sinner, was not able to save the people of God from his wrath.

That great news, or what great news I should say, it is today to know that we have a greater king than David. A greater king who is able to and has withstood the wrath of God against our sin.

And we have a much greater king. In John 3, 17, it says, God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

[28 : 28] So, thank God for our perfect king, Jesus Christ. Verse 14, we see David's faith. Then David said to God, 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.

And so, we can sympathize with David's situation here. Which option would you have chosen if it was you? You know, I think I would probably have gone, let's get this thing over with, right?

Give me those three days. The thing is, a lot of people think that that is what David, that that was David's choice. Again, we don't know for sure but I would think by reading the text that David is basically saying, you know what God, I've got us into this mess, I'm falling on your mercy and I think by the wording there it seems like he's saying, you know, you choose it.

Just don't let me fall into the hands of men. And so, that's what I think what's going on. And then in verse 15, we see the reality of God's wrath for it says there the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning until the appointed time and there died of the people of Dan to Beersheba 70,000 men. And again, if our understanding of the correct numbering would be right, that's not going to be 70,000 but more like 700 which is still very, very tragic.

[29 : 53] But before we object to this severe punishment, remember that we do not know what offense had kindled the Lord's anger. We are therefore hardly in a position to judge the punishment as excessive.

Again, all sin is committed against God. And then in verses 16 and 19, we see the wrath of God and the mercy of God. It says, the plague that the Lord sent is described in verse 16 in terms of an angel which is the word that means messenger who was the Lord's agent and bringing this terrible judgment.

This messenger was no doubt acting behind the scenes as far as most observers of the catastrophe were concerned but his presence and activity were known to God and they became clear to David.

And then in verse 16, we have the mystery of God's mercy. The Lord did not allow the plague he had sent to do as much damage as it might have done. Let's look at verse 16. 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 Aaronuah, the Jebusite. So in this strange scene, it was then the messenger stretching out his hand towards Jerusalem that the Lord stopped the destruction.

[31 : 17] And so the implication seems to be that this was before the destruction had run its course that the three days had not been completed. Again, Jerusalem represents God's promises.

This is the place where the Ark of the Covenant was. It was called the city of David to whom the Lord had promised a kingdom that would be established forever. And so the Lord was always faithful to his promises and therefore he had mercy for the sake of his great name.

And the Lord, again, takes no delight in death and destruction that wickedness brings, we see in Ezekiel 18.32. While the Lord's relenting must be understood in human terms, neither must not be understood, excuse me, in human terms, neither must it be emptied of its force.

The Lord delights in expressing mercy and is grieved at sin and its consequences. So now, the place where this mercy was given is carefully noted for reasons that will soon become clear.

And there we have David's confession in verse 17. 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?

[32 : 27] Please let your hand be against me and against my father's house. So once again, we find, even in the context of David's inadequacy, a wonderful anticipation of the good shepherd who was now, who has now done just that for us.

And then in verse 18, the word of the Lord came and God came that day to David and said to him, Go up and raise an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Aaronua, the Jebusite. So David went up at Gad's word as the Lord commanded in verse 19.

And there we see the wrath of God and atonement in verses 20 through 25. The detail in which the story of David's acquisition of this threshing floor is told, suggesting that this, the last event recorded in the book of Samuel, must be a very important event.

Curiously, most space is given to the account of how the site was acquired. And there's four important points here. The first is this, that this site came into Israel's ownership through a legitimate transaction.

The importance of this has to do with where, what this future site would end up becoming. Second thing, both men understood that an altar was for offering sacrifices.

[33 : 46] They both understood this. Third, David's refusal to offer burnt offering to the Lord, my God, that cost me nothing is also striking because that cost me nothing renders a Hebrew word that elsewhere is translated without cause.

So it would be inappropriate for David to offer sacrifices without anything that had cost him or that would not be kind of like a worthless place.

And then fourthly, David knew that there was a connection between the altar he had been told to build and the stopping of the plague. And the plague did not end as a result of the altar being built. The Lord ended them at the appointed time.

So, does anybody have any idea what this place ended up becoming? the temple. That's where the temple was. Isn't that, that's where the temple was built. Extra credit, right?

There's, there's some mints and some candies up there that you're, you're welcome to have. Good. So, I want to conclude by making this statement.

[34 : 48] The New Testament proclaims that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin he condemns sin in the flesh.

Romans 8, 1 and 3. I don't know how long you've been in 2 Samuel. You've probably been here for a while. But it's interesting how this story ends.

And, you know, the one thing I love about scripture is we come to instances like this where they create a lot of questions for us. And I think in the, again, in those times where we are coming to these questions and we're trying to figure out, you know, what exactly is happening that God is inviting us to dig deeper, to come further into his word for understanding.

And we use that, we sharpen one another in helping each other to understand. So again, if you have any questions, I invite you asking them and I will do my best to answer.

But the thing, again, that we've got to understand is that all sin is committed against God. and that there's a penalty for sin and thankfully for us, Jesus Christ endured that wrath for our sins on the cross that we might have eternal life.

[36 : 08] And so, that's good news. That's great news as a matter of fact. And it makes it even more important, again, that we are making sure that we are sharing the gospel with people because apart from the shed blood of Jesus Christ, apart from the cross, there is nothing.

That is protecting them or sealing them from the wrath of God. And so we must share the gospel and we must let people know about what Jesus has done for them.