

# CHAPTER 24

The last words of David, which we read in the chapter before, were admirably good, but in this chapter we read of some of his last works, which were none of the best; yet he repented, and did his first works again, and so he finished well. We have here,

- I.** His sin, which was numbering the people in the pride of his heart (v. 1-9).
- II.** His conviction of the sin, and repentance for it (v. 10).
- III.** The judgment inflicted upon him for it (v. 11-15).
- IV.** The staying of the judgment (v. 16, 17).
- V.** The erecting of an altar in token of God's reconciliation to him and his people (v. 18-25).

## <100>2 SAMUEL 24:1-9

### THE PEOPLE NUMBERED

Here we have,

**I.** The orders which David gave to Joab to number the people of Israel and Judah, v. 1, 2. Two things here seem strange: —

**1.** The sinfulness of this. What harm was there in it? Did not Moses twice number the people without any crime? Does not political arithmetic come in among the other policies of a prince? Should not the shepherd know the number of his sheep? Does not the Son of David know all his own by name? Might not he make good use of this calculation? What evil has he done, if he do this? *Answer*, It is certain that it was a sin, and a great sin; but where the evil of it lay is not so certain.

**(1.)** Some think the fault was that he numbered those that were under twenty years old if they were but of stature and strength able to bear arms, and that this was the reason why this account was not enrolled, because it was illegal, <1372>1 Chronicles 27:23, 24.

(2.) Others think the fault was that he did not require the half-shekel, which was to be paid for the service of the sanctuary whenever the people were numbered, as a *ransom for their souls*, <sup><2312></sup>Exodus 30:12.

(3.) Others think that he did it with a design to impose a tribute upon them for himself, to be put into his treasury, and this by way of poll, so that when he knew their numbers he could tell what it would amount to. But nothing of this appears, nor was David ever a raiser of taxes.

(4.) This was the fault, that he had no orders from God to do it, nor was there any occasion for the doing of it. It was a needless trouble both to himself and to his people.

(5.) Some think that it was an affront to the ancient promise which God made to Abraham, that his seed should be innumerable as the dust of the earth; it savoured of distrust of that promise, or a design to show that it was not fulfilled in the letter of it. He would number those of whom God had said that they could not be numbered. Those know not what they do that go about to disprove the word of God.

(6.) That which was the worst thing in numbering the people was that David did it in the pride of his heart, which was Hezekiah's sin in showing his treasures to the ambassadors.

[1.] It was a proud conceit of his own greatness in having the command of so numerous a people, as if their increase, which was to be ascribed purely to the blessing of God, had been owing to any conduct of his own.

[2.] It was a proud confidence in his own strength. By publishing among the nations the number of his people, he thought to appear the more formidable, and doubted not that, if he should have any war, he should overpower his enemies with the multitude of his forces, trusting in God only. God judges not of sin as we do. What appears to us harmless, or at least but a small offence, may be a great sin in the eye of God, who sees men's principles, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. But his judgment, we are sure, is according to truth.

2. The spring from which it is here said to arise is yet more strange, v. 1. It is not strange that *the anger of the Lord should be kindled against Israel*. There was cause enough for it. They were unthankful for the blessings of David's government, and strangely drawn in to take part with Absalom first and afterwards with Sheba. We have reason to think that their peace and

plenty made them secure and sensual, and that God was therefore displeased with them. But that, in this displeasure, he should move David to number the people is very strange. We are sure that God is not the author of sin; he tempts no man: we are told (~~1320~~1 Chronicles 21:1) that *Satan provoked David to number Israel*. Satan, as an enemy, suggested it for a sin, as he put it into the heart of Judas to betray Christ. God, as righteous Judge, permitted it, with a design, from this sin of David, to take an occasion to punish Israel for other sins, for which he might justly have punished them without this. But, as before he brought a famine upon them for the sin of Saul, so now a pestilence for the sin of David, that princes may from these instances learn, when the judgments of God are abroad, to suspect that their sins are the ground of the controversy, and may therefore repent and reform themselves, which should have a great influence upon national repentance and reformation, and that people may learn to pray for those in authority, that God would keep them from sin, because, if they sin, the kingdom smarts.

**II.** The opposition which Joab made to these orders. Even he was aware of David's folly and vain-glory in this design. He observed that David gave no reason for it, only, *Number the people, that I may know the number of the people*; and therefore he endeavored to divert his pride, and in a much more respectful manner than he had before endeavoured to divert his passion upon the death of Absalom; then he spoke rudely and insolently (~~1095~~2 Samuel 19:5-7), but now as became him: *Now the Lord thy God add unto the people a hundred fold*, v. 3. There was no occasion to tax them, nor to enlist them, nor to make any distribution of them. They were all easy and happy; and Joab wished both that their number might increase and that the king, though old, might live to see their increase, and have the satisfaction of it. *“But why doth my lord the king delight in this thing? What need is there of doing it?” Pauperis est numerare pecus — Leave it to the poor to count their flocks.* Especially why should David, who speaks so much of delighting in God and the exercises of devotion, and who, being old, one would think, should have put away childish things, take a pleasure (so he calls it modestly, but he means taking pride) in a thing of this nature? Note, Many things, not in themselves sinful, turn into sin to us by our inordinately delighting in them. Joab was aware of David's vanity herein, but he himself was not. It would be good for us to have a friend that would faithfully admonish us when we say or do any thing proud or vain-glorious, for we often do so and are not ourselves aware of it.

**III.** The orders executed notwithstanding. *The king's word prevailed*, v. 4. He would have it done; Joab must not gainsay it, lest he be thought to grudge his time and pains in the king's service. It is an unhappiness to great men to have those about them that will aid them and serve them in that which is evil. Joab, according to order, applied himself with some reluctancy to this unpleasing task, and took the captains of the host to help him. They began in the most distant places, in the east first, on the other side Jordan (v. 5), then they went towards Dan in the north (v. 6), so to Tyre on the east, and thence to Beersheba in the south, v. 7. Above nine months were spent in taking this account, a great deal of trouble and amazement were occasioned by it in the country (v. 8), and the sum total was, at length, brought to the king at Jerusalem, v. 9. Whether the numbers answered David's expectation or no we are not told, nor whether the account fed his pride or mortified it. The people were very many, but, it may be, not so many as he thought they were. They had not increased in Canaan as they had in Egypt, nor were much more than double to what they were when they came into Canaan under Joshua, about 400 years before; yet it is an evidence that Canaan was a very fruitful land that so many thousands were maintained within so narrow a compass.

## ~~2~~ 2 SAMUEL 24:10-17

### THE NUMBERING OF THE PEOPLE PUNISHED

We have here David repenting of the sin and yet punished for it, God repenting of the judgment and David thereby made more penitent.

**I.** Here is David's penitent reflection upon and confession of his sin in numbering the people. While the thing was in doing, during all those nine months, we do not find that David was sensible of his sin, for had he been so he would have countermanded the orders he had given; but, when the account was finished and laid before him, that very night his conscience was awakened, and he felt the pain of it just then when he promised himself the pleasure of it. When he was about to feast on the satisfaction of the number of his people, it was turned into the gall of asps within him; sense of the sin cast a damp upon the joy, v. 10.

**1.** He was convinced of his sin: *His heart smote him* before the prophet came to him (I think it should not be read *for*, v. 11, but *and, when David was up*, so it is in the original), his conscience showed him the evil of what he had done; now that appeared sin, and exceedingly sinful, which before he saw no harm in. He reflected upon it with great regret and his heart reproached him for it. Note, It is a good thing, when a man has sinned, to have a heart within him to smite him for it; it is a good sign of a principle of grace in the heart, and a good step towards repentance and reformation.

**2.** He confessed it to God and begged earnestly for the forgiveness of it.

**(1.)** He owned that he had sinned, sinned greatly, though to others it might seem no sin at all, or a very little one. True penitents, whose consciences are tender and well informed, see that evil in sin which others do not see.

**(2.)** He owned that he had *done foolishly, very foolishly*, because he had done it in the pride of his heart; and it was folly for him to be proud of the numbers of his people, when they were God's people, not his, and, as many as they were, God could soon make them fewer.

**(3.)** He cried to God for pardon: *I beseech thee, O Lord! take away the iniquity of thy servant. If we confess our sins*, we may pray in faith that God *will forgive them*, and take away, by pardoning mercy, that iniquity which we cast away by sincere repentance.

**II.** The just and necessary correction which he suffered for this sin. David had been full of tossings to and fro all night under the sense of his sin, having no rest in his bones because of it, *and he arose in the morning* expecting to hear of God's displeasure against him for what he had done, or designing to speak with Gad his seer concerning it. Gad is called his *seer* because he had him always at hand to advise with in the things of God, and made use of him as his confessor and counsellor; but God prevented him, and directed the prophet Gad what to say to him (v. 11), and,

**1.** Three things are taken for granted,

**(1.)** That David must be corrected for his fault. It is too great a crime, and reflects too much dishonour upon God, to go unpunished, even in David himself. Of the seven things that God hates, pride is the first, <sup><1167></sup> Proverbs 6:17. Note, Those who truly repent of their sins, and have them pardoned are yet often made to smart for them in this world.

(2.) The punishment must answer to the sin. He was proud of the judgment he must be chastised with for this sin must be such as will make them fewer. Note, What we make the matter of our pride it is just with God to take from us, or embitter to us, and, some way or other, to make the matter of our punishment.

(3.) It must be such a punishment as the people must have a large share in, *for God's anger was kindled against Israel*, v. 1. Though it was David's sin that immediately opened the sluice, the sins of the people all contributed to the deluge.

2. As to the punishment that must be inflicted,

(1.) David is told to choose what rod he will be beaten with, v. 12, 13. His heavenly Father must correct him, but, to show that he does not do it willingly, he gives David leave to make choice whether it shall be by war, famine, or pestilence, three sore judgments, which greatly weaken and diminish a people. God, by putting him thus to his choice, designed,

[1.] To humble him the more for his sin, which we would see to be exceedingly sinful when he came to consider each of these judgments as exceedingly dreadful. Or,

[2.] To upbraid him with the proud conceit he had of his own sovereignty over Israel. He that is so great a prince begins to think he may have what he will. "Come then," says God, "which wilt thou have of these three things?" Compare <sup>2347</sup>Jeremiah 34:17, *I proclaim a liberty for you*, but it is such a liberty as this of David's *to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine*; and <sup>2415D</sup>Jeremiah 15:2, *Such as are for death to death*. Or

[3.] To give him some encouragement under the correction, letting him know that God did not cast him out of communion with himself, but that still his secret was with him, and in afflicting him he considered his frame and what he <sup>could</sup> best bear. Or

[4.] That he might the more patiently bear the rod when it was a rod of his own choosing. The prophet bids him advise with himself, and then tell him what answer he should *return to him that sent him*. Note, Ministers are sent of God to us, and they must give an account of the success of their embassy. It concerns us therefore to consider what answer they shall return from us, that they may give up their account of us with joy.

(2.) He objects only against the judgments of the sword, and, for the other two, he refers the matter to God, but intimates his choice of the pestilence rather (v. 14): *I am in a great strait; and well he might be when fear, and the pit, and the snare, were before him, and if he escape one, he must inevitably fall into the other,* <sup><248B></sup>Jeremiah 48:43, 44. Note, Sin brings men into straits; wise and good men often distress themselves by their own folly.

[1.] He begs that he may *not fall into the hand of man*. “Whatever comes, *let us not flee three months before our enemies;*” this would sully all the glory of David’s triumphs and give occasion to the enemies of God and Israel to *behave themselves proudly*. See <sup><1526></sup>Deuteronomy 32:26, 27. “Their tender mercies are cruel; and in three months they will do that damage to the nation which many years will not repair.” But,

[2.] He casts himself upon God: *Let us fall now into the hand of the Lord, for his mercies are great. Men are God’s hand* (so they are called, <sup><9174></sup>Psalms 17:14, the sword of his sending), yet there are some judgments which come more immediately from his hand than others, as famine and pestilence, and David refers it to God which of these shall be the scourge, and God chooses the shortest, that he may the sooner testify his being reconciled. But some think that David, by these words, intimates his choice of the pestilence. The land had not yet recovered the famine under which it smarted three years upon the Gibeonites’ account, and therefore, “Let us not be corrected with that rod, for that also will be the triumph of our neighbours,” hence we read of *the reproach of famine* (<sup><1530></sup>Ezekiel 36:30); “but if Israel must be diminished, let it be by the pestilence, for that is *falling into the hands of the Lord,*” who usually inflicted that judgment by the hand of his own immediate servants, the angels, as in the death of the first-born of Egypt. That is a judgment to which David himself, and his own family, lie as open as the meanest subject, but not so either to famine or sword, and therefore David, tenderly conscious of his guilt, chooses that. Sword and famine will devour one as well as another, but, it may be thought, the destroying angel will draw his sword against those who are known to God to be most guilty. This will be of the shortest continuance, and he dreads the thought of lying long under the tokens of God’s displeasure. *It is a dreadful thing*, the apostle says, *to fall into the hands of the living God* (<sup><1508></sup>Hebrews 10:31), a fearful thing indeed for sinners that have, by their impenitency, shut themselves out from all hope of his mercy. But David, a penitent, dares cast himself into God’s hand, knowing he shall

find that *his mercies are great*. Good men, even when they are under God's frowns, yet will entertain no other than good thoughts of him. *Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him*.

**(3.)** A pestilence is accordingly sent (v. 15), which, for the extent of it, spread from Dan to Beersheba, from one end of the kingdom to the other, which showed it to come immediately from God's hand and not from any natural causes. David has his choice; he suffers by miracle, and not by ordinary means. For the continuance of it, it lasted from morning (this very morning on which it was put to David's choice) to the time appointed that is, to the third day (so Mr. Poole), or only to the evening of the first day, the time appointed for the evening sacrifice, so bishop Patrick and others, who reckon that the pestilence lasted but nine hours, and that, in compassion to David, God shortened the time he had first mentioned. The execution the pestilence did was very severe. *There died 70,000 men*, that were all well, and sick, and dead, in a few hours. What a great cry, may we suppose, was there now throughout all the land of Israel, as there was in Egypt when the first-born were slain! but that was at midnight, this in the daytime, <sup><39106></sup>Psalm 91:6. See the power of the angels, when God gives them commission, either to save or to destroy. Joab is nine months in passing with his pen, the angel but nine hours in passing with his sword, through all the coasts and corners of the land of Israel. See how easily God can bring down the proudest sinners, and how much we owe daily to the divine patience. David's adultery is punished, for the present, only with the death of one infant, his pride with the death of all those thousands, so much does God hate pride. The number slain amounted to almost half a decimation, 70,000 being about one in twenty. Now, we may suppose, David's flesh *trembled for fear of God and he was afraid of his judgments*, <sup><39120></sup>Psalm 119:120.

**III.** God's gracious relaxation of the judgment, when it began to be inflicted upon Jerusalem (v. 16): *The angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem*, as if he intended to do greater execution there than any where else, even *to destroy it*. The country had drunk of the bitter cup, but Jerusalem must drink the dregs. It should seem that was last numbered, and therefore was reserved to be last plagued; perhaps there was more wickedness, especially more pride (and that was the sin now chastised), in Jerusalem than elsewhere, therefore the hand of the destroyer is stretched out upon that; but then *the Lord repented him of the evil*, changed not his mind, but his way; and said to the destroying angel, *It is enough; stay now*

*thy hand, and let mercy rejoice against judgment.* Jerusalem shall be spared for the ark's sake, for it is the place God hath chosen to put his name there. See here how ready God is to forgive and how little pleasure he takes in punishing; and let it encourage us to meet him by repentance in the way of his judgments. This was on Mount Moriah. Dr. Lightfoot observes that in the very place where Abraham, by a countermand from heaven, was stayed from slaying his son, this angel, by a like countermand, was stayed from destroying Jerusalem. It is for the sake of the great sacrifice that our forfeited lives are preserved from the destroying angel.

**IV.** David's renewed repentance for his sin upon this occasion, v. 17. He saw the angel (God opening his eyes for that purpose), saw his sword stretched out to destroy, a flaming sword, saw him ready to sheath it upon the orders given him to stay proceedings; seeing all this, he spoke, not to the angel (he knew better than to address himself to the servant in the presence of the Master, or to give that honour to the creature which is the Creator's due), but *to the Lord, and said, Lo, I have sinned.* Note, True penitents, the more they perceive of God's sparing pardoning mercy the more humbled they are for sin and the more resolved against it. They shall be ashamed *when I am pacified towards them,* ~~2171~~ Ezekiel 16:63. Observe,

**1.** How he criminales himself, as if he could never speak ill enough of his own fault: *"I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; mine is the crime, and therefore on me be the cross. Let thy hand be against me, and my father's house. I am the sinner, let me be the sufferer;"* so willing was he to accept the punishment of his iniquity, though he was worth 10,000 of them.

**2.** How he intercedes for the people, whose bitter lamentations made his heart to ache, and his ears to tingle: *These sheep, what have they done?* Done! Why they had done much amiss; it was their sin that provoked God to leave David to himself to do as he did; yet, as becomes a penitent, he is severe upon his own faults, while he extenuates theirs. Most people, when God's judgments are abroad, charge others with being the cause of them, and care not who falls by them, so they can escape. But David's penitent and public spirit was otherwise affected. Let this remind us of the grace of our Lord Jesus, who gave himself for our sins and was willing that God's hand should be against him, that we might escape. The shepherd was smitten that the sheep might be spared.

## 2 SAMUEL 24:18-25

### THE PLAGUE REMOVED

Here is,

**I.** A command sent to David to erect an altar in the place where he saw the angel, v. 18. This was to intimate to David,

**1.** That, upon his repeated submission and humiliation, God was now thoroughly reconciled to him; *for, if the Lord had been pleased to kill him, he would not have accepted an offering*, and therefore would not have ordered him to *build an altar*. God's encouraging us to offer to him spiritual sacrifices is a comfortable evidence of his reconciling us to himself.

**2.** That peace is made between God and sinners by sacrifice, and not otherwise, even by Christ the great propitiation, of whom all the legal sacrifices were types. It is for his sake that the destroying angel is told to stay his hand.

**3.** That when God's judgments are graciously stayed we ought to acknowledge it with thankfulness to his praise. This altar was to be for thank-offerings. See <sup>2311</sup>Isaiah 12:1.

**II.** The purchase which David made of the ground in order hereunto. It seems the owner was a Jebusite, Araunah by name, proselyted no doubt to the Jewish religion, though by birth a Gentile, and therefore allowed, not only to dwell among the Israelites, but to have a possession of his own in a city, <sup>1859</sup>Leviticus 25:29, 30. The piece of ground was a threshing-floor, a mean place, *yet* thus dignified — a place of labour, *therefore* thus dignified. Now,

**1.** David went in person to the owner, to treat with him. See his justice, that he would not so much as use this place in the present exigence, though the proprietor was an alien, though he himself was a king, and though he had express orders from God to rear an altar there, till he had bought it and paid for it. God *hates robbery for burnt-offering*. See his humility, how far he was from taking state; though a king, he was now a penitent, and therefore, in token of his self-abasement, he neither sent for Araunah to come to him nor sent another to deal with him, but went himself (v. 19),

and, though it looked like a diminution of himself, he lost no honour by it. Araunah, when he saw him, went and *bowed himself to the ground before him* v. 20. Great men will never be the less respected for their humility, but the more.

**2.** Araunah, when he understood his business (v. 21), generously offered him, not only the ground to build his altar on, but *oxen for sacrifices*, and other things that might be of use to him in the service (v. 22), and all this *gratis*, and a good prayer into the bargain: *The Lord thy God accept thee!* This he did,

**(1.)** Because he had a generous spirit with a great estate. *He gave as a king* (v. 23); though an ordinary subject, he had the spirit of a prince. In the Hebrew it is, *He gave, even the king to the king*, whence it is supposed that Araunah had been king of the Jebusites in that place, or was descended from their royal family, though now a tributary to David.

**(2.)** Because he highly esteemed David, though his conqueror, upon the score of his personal merits, and never thought he could do too much to oblige him.

**(3.)** Because he had an affection for Israel, and earnestly desired that *the plague might be stayed*; and the honour of its being stayed at *his threshing-floor*, he would account a valuable consideration for all he now tendered to David.

**3.** David resolved to pay the full value of it, and did so, v. 24. Here were two generous souls well met. Araunah is very willing to give; but David is determined to buy, and for a good reason: he will not offer that to God which costs him nothing. He would not take advantage of the pious Jebusite's generosity. He thanked him, no doubt, for his kind offer, but paid him *fifty shekels of silver* for the floor and the oxen for the present service, and afterwards 600 shekels of gold for the ground adjoining, to build the temple on. Note, Those know not what religion is whose chief care it is to make it cheap and easy to themselves, and who are best pleased with that which costs them least pains or money. What have we our substance for but to honour God with it? and how can it be better bestowed?

**III.** The building of the altar, and the offering of the proper sacrifices upon it (v. 25), burnt-offerings to the glory of God's justice in the execution that had been done, and peace-offerings to the glory of his mercy

in the seasonable staying of the process. Hereupon God showed (it is supposed by fire from heaven consuming the sacrifices) that *he was entreated for the land*, and that it was in mercy that the plague was removed and in token of God's being reconciled both to prince and people. Christ is our altar, our sacrifice; in him alone we may expect to find favour with God, to escape his wrath, and the sword, the flaming sword, of the cherubim who *keep the way of the tree of life*.