

David Counts the Fighting Men

1 Chronicles 21:1-30

Our lesson today focuses on 1 Chronicles 21:1-30. While we will be studying this event in 1 Chronicles, there is a parallel account in 2 Samuel 24. The record of this event in 1 Chronicles indicates that it takes place toward the end of David's reign. If that is the case, David's census of the available fighting men may have something to do with his dynastic plans in anticipation of Solomon's rule.¹

As you are reading, bear in mind that scripture doesn't always relay all the facts of an event it records. The information provided in these verses does not go into detail about why the Lord's wrath came so heavily against Israel at this time. As you study this lesson, keep in mind that we do not have the depth of comprehension to understand the Lord's judgment against Israel. To have incurred the wrath that came upon Israel, David and the nation must have done something deserving of this plague. What we do know is that the Lord is just and slow to anger. If you need to remind yourself, turn to Exodus 34:6. Our compassionate God is also a righteous and holy God.



Read 1 Chronicles 21:1-30.

David instructs Joab to take a census of all the fighting men in Israel and Judah, from Dan in the North all the way down to Beersheba in Judah, the southern end of Israel's border. Joab goes so far as not only to question David's motive, but to purposely not complete the task. He is giving David an opportunity to change his course of direction. Joab refuses to do a complete census because "*the king's command was repulsive to him.*" Taking a census of the fighting men essentially amounted to a draft in preparation for war. Exodus 30:12² permits a census to be taken, but it must be done properly. If it is not done properly, then Torah warns that judgment will come upon the land in the form of a plague. David's decision to pursue this course of action happened during a time of peace, he was not preparing to go to war against an enemy of Israel.

The reason Torah puts restrictions on taking a census, or creating a standing army, was to prevent Israel from depending upon its own strength and ability, rather the Lord's protection and guidance. David was teetering on the edge of pride and a false sense of security and strength. There was no current threat to the nation of Israel at this time in

¹ Bible Knowledge Commentary

² "When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the LORD a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them. Ex 30:12 (NIV)

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David's reign. He had no reason to call a census or draft. If Israel had a strong national army, what would prevent the King from using that army to his own end and not the Lord's? David had extended Israel to encompass the original land inheritance God wanted to give Israel in the time of Moses and Joshua. What more did David want that the Lord would not provide? Did he have his eyes on acquiring more land – conquering his neighbors where he had not been led to do so by the Lord?

David had either forgotten, or chose not to remember that it is the Lord who fights and wins the battle, and the size of the army is not important. At the beginning of our study we saw this concept in action with Jonathan. Read 1 Samuel 14:1-6. When just Jonathan and his armor bearer faced an outpost of Philistines, they put their trust in the Lord to deliver them. *"Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, 'Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few.'" (1 Sam 14:6)*. David was also confident in this spiritual truth when he alone as a young man, untrained in battle, faced and brought down the giant Goliath. For whatever reason, David followed his own desire, a desire to satisfy his pride possibly, and ordered Joab to count the men of Israel. What David was doing in disobedience to the Torah could grow into a greater disobedience later if an end to it wasn't brought on quickly. David's disobedience likely has more to do with his motive in taking the census, rather than in failing to do it properly. Scripture does not tell us whether or not the census was carried out properly. But, there is pride to be found in knowing the size and strength of a nation. And there is a sense of security and strength in knowing the size of the army.

David's reason behind taking the census is somewhat unclear to us in this passage, but 2 Samuel 24:1 gives us some indication that the Lord was working out some tendency in David before it grew into a bigger problem. We don't know why David was pursuing this census, other than the fact that verse 1 tells us:

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." 2 Sam 24:1

Verse one tells us that a) the anger of the Lord burned against Israel; b) the Lord incited David against Israel; and c) the Lord encouraged David to take this census. The first issue we need to deal with is why would the Lord encourage David to sin? James 1:13 tells us, *"God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone."* God is not leading David to sin; He is allowing David to pursue his own inclination in this matter. He is not preventing David from following through on his own decision to take this census. If we look at 1

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Chronicles 21:1 we see a slightly different statement: “*Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel*”

Verse 1 in the Chronicles passage tells us it is Satan who rose up against Israel and incited David. We must remember that Satan can only have power over the Lord’s people when the Lord permits him. Hebrew writers don’t always differentiate between primary and secondary causes. If God permitted Satan to tempt Israel and David in this manner, the Hebrew writers would understand it to still mean that God permitted this to happen. If there is a tendency to sin, God is allowing this sin to come to light so that it can be dealt with. It is the nation and David that God’s anger is burning against; there must be some national tendency to pride in the strength and wealth of the nation rather than confidence and gratitude in God’s provision and peace. David’s pride is a reflection of a national tendency to that same sense of pride, achievement and security directed at the ability of their army and their king, not their God. Whatever may be going on in the Nation of Israel, God will use David’s foolish action to discipline the nation. 1 Chronicles 21:7 concludes this section with the statement, “*This command [of David to initiate a census] was also evil in the sight of God; so he punished Israel.*”

Upon hearing Joab’s report, David is conscience-stricken (2 Samuel 24: 10). He knows in his heart that the census was taken in violation of God’s will and Torah law. His motives were not pure, he admits to doing a “*very foolish thing*”. David confesses his sin. Before the next morning the Lord sends the prophet Gad³ to announce the three options of divine judgment upon Israel. There would be three⁴ years of famine, three months of fleeing from the enemy, or three days of plague. All three of these options would affect all of Israel.

David says that he is in great distress (v.13). The Hebrew word *šārā*⁵ (distressed) gives a meaning of being besieged as if by an enemy, being greatly afflicted. David says in 2 Samuel 24:14 “*Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great, but do not let me fall into the hands of men.*” He knew he had sinned. He rather the Lord himself metes out punishment than an enemy. The Lord is just and knows the hearts of men. He is righteous, merciful, and loves his creation and will discipline, not punish. Knowing that the Lord would be more merciful than any of Israel’s enemies, David chose a form of punishment that did not require a human agent, and he chose the judgment of the shortest possible

³ Gad had been with David since the time before he became king. Gad was with him when David and his men were in the cave of Adullam in 1 Samuel 22.

⁴ Some translations say 7 years of famine.

⁵ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

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duration. Verse 14 tells us, *"So the Lord sent a plague on Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead."*

"And God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem. But as the angel was doing so, the LORD saw it and was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was destroying the people, "Enough! Withdraw your hand." The angel of the LORD was then standing at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." 1 Chronicles 21:15

The Hebrew word *nacham* translated grieved, also means to sigh, groan, lament, great sorrow, commiserate, console sorrow. The same word was used in 2 Samuel 12:24 when David consoled Bathsheba over the death of their baby. The Lord grieved as he surveyed the death in Jerusalem. The Lord stopped the angel from destroying the people. This scripture tells us the angel of the Lord was standing upon the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. David was instructed to build an altar and offer sacrifices upon the threshing floor. Araunah offers to give David the threshing floor, the animals, everything he needs to make this sacrifice. David responds, *"I will not take for the LORD what is yours, or sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing."* (v. 24) David knew that faith that cost nothing was worth nothing, for God or for man. He insisted on purchasing the land, the animals and materials because the cost of his sin necessitated the cost of the sacrifice. David's purchase of the threshing floor, and its consecration through the offering of sacrifices in response to his sin and the sin of the nation, sets forth this location to become a permanent and holy site set aside for worship.⁶ The Lord accepted the sacrifices David made on behalf of all Israel and the plague came to an end.

This threshing floor had been the site of God's intervention with man on other occasions; it would be again this day. The threshing floor of Araunah is known by another name. It is also Mt. Moriah. In Genesis 22 Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac to the Lord who provided an alternative, a substitutionary sacrifice of a ram on Mt. Moriah. In 2 Chronicles 3:1 the Lord tells Solomon to build the temple on Mt. Moriah: *"Then Solomon began to build the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David. It was on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, the place provided by David."* The temple would be the new location not only of the Ark of the Covenant, but also where all future sacrifices on behalf of Israel would be offered.

It would seem that this is a place strongly associated with substitutionary sacrifice. This location is special to the Lord. Abraham, the father of the Nation of Israel nearly sacrificed Isaac here, and did make an altar and sacrifice to the Lord. David made an altar and a sacrifice to the Lord in this location. David's actions foreshadow the actions of Jesus whose sacrifice on a hill near Jerusalem brought to an end a tragic spiritual plague. David's

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sacrifice was blood and life poured out on the wood surrounding an altar, Jesus' sacrifice was his blood and life poured out upon a wooden cross so that the faithful would not die eternal death. It becomes the location for the temple that Solomon builds. To the Lord, who sees the future rolled out like a scroll as if it were lived yesterday, this is a place of sacrifice and mercy at *no small cost*. In fact this location would see sacrifice of immense cost. When the Lord was grieved to see so much death around Jerusalem, is it possible that he saw also the death of his son from this height as well?