

## The Severity and Mercy of God

### 2 Samuel 24

Several years ago a man in his 50s came to faith in Christ and started reading the Bible for the first time. About once a week he would come into my office to talk about the things he was reading in the Old Testament. Quite often the things he wanted to talk about were the shocking, unusual things that God did or that God commanded – such as when God commanded the Israelites to kill every man, woman, and child when they conquered a city (see Deut. 3:6, 1 Samuel 15:3). Those discussions reminded me that some of what is written in the Old Testament can be troubling. Perhaps you've been shocked at some of the things we've seen this fall in the life of David.

But it's not just the Old Testament. When you read the gospels, you learn that Jesus talked about hell more than anybody else. For example, Jesus told His followers in Matthew 10:28:

28 "And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Hell is a place of conscious, eternal punishment apart from the presence of God. Jesus' point is that if God has the power to banish people to the destruction of hell, we should "fear" Him (instead of merely fearing other people). We find throughout Scripture what is sometimes called "the severity of God."

And yet the overarching plot of the Bible is that God loves us so much that He sent His one and only Son to die for our sins. He could have washed His hands of the entire human race, but His compassion compelled Him to provide a sacrifice for our sin. Jesus willingly went to the cross so that we might come back into relationship with God. You simply cannot overstate the depth of God's compassion for humanity. He literally could not have done anything more costly than send Jesus to bear our sins. And so we find in Scripture both the severity and mercy of God.

***David's Experience of the Severity and Mercy of God (2 Samuel 24)*** Today we are going to consider an example of the severity and mercy of God in David's experience. Turn with me to 2 Samuel 24.

1 Now again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, "Go, number Israel and Judah."

We aren't told as much as we'd like about what's actually happening here. Why did the anger of the Lord burn against Israel? We aren't told; there was apparently some pattern of sin or disobedience. Why would God's anger (or God Himself) incite David to "number Israel and Judah"? We just aren't told. We'll soon find out that numbering Israel and Judah was a serious sin. We aren't really told why, but apparently taking a census of his troops meant that David was trusting in his own power instead of trusting in God (cf. Isaiah 31:1). To us it's an obvious thing to know how many troops and how many weapons you have before going to battle. But in Israel, such calculations based strictly on numbers were evidence of trusting in oneself instead of God.

The parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 21 has a seemingly different explanation of why David decided to “number” Israel. We read this in 1 Chronicles 21:1:

1 Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel.

Here the Chronicler writes that Satan (which means Adversary) is the one who prompted David to number Israel whereas 2 Samuel 24:1 said that God (or God’s anger) incited David to number Israel and Judah. This reminds us of Job’s experience: Satan was the one who brought destruction into his life, but Job attributed it all to God (“Should we accept good from the hand of God and not evil?”). This also reminds us of Paul’s thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12: it was from God, but it was a messenger of Satan. The picture that emerges is that of God being sovereign over the actions of Satan. I would harmonize 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1 by saying that even though Satan prompted David to number the troops, God was sovereignly testing David to expose the object of David’s trust – whether in God or in military strength.

2 And the king said to Joab the commander of the army who was with him, "Go about now through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and register the people, that I may know the number of the people."

From reading 2 Samuel, nobody would accuse Joab of being particularly clued in to the will of God (he was a brutal person), but this time Joab had it right:

3 But Joab said to the king, "Now may the LORD your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see; but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?"

Joab tries to dissuade David from numbering the people. He basically says, “I hope God gives you a hundred times as many troops as you have, but please don’t command us to count the troops.”

4 Nevertheless, the king's word prevailed against Joab and against the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king, to register the people of Israel.

Verses 5 through 8 describe how Joab and his commanders went through Israel and Judah taking a census of the troops, a process that took nine months and twenty days (v. 8). They came to David in Jerusalem with this report:

9 And Joab gave the number of the registration of the people to the king; and there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men.

[These numbers have generated a tremendous amount of study and discussion among scholars and commentators. First, these numbers are different than the numbers given in the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 21 (1.1 million in Israel and 470,000 in Judah); there are plausible explanations for why 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles give different numbers. Second, some

commentators think that in either case the population of Israel and Judah couldn't have been that large. If you want to know some of the ways people address these difficulties, consult *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 1098-1099.]

In verse 10 we learn that David was convicted of his sin soon after Joab brought the report. When he sinned with Bathsheba, he had to be confronted by Nathan the prophet before he came clean. But this time his heart was sufficiently troubled to go directly to God before a prophet showed up on his doorstep:

10 Now David's heart troubled him after he had numbered the people. So 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 acted very foolishly."

Confession of sin is more than nodding your head to God and saying, "Sorry. . ." Repentance involves a conscious acknowledgement of what you've done wrong. Here David has clearly internalized the seriousness of what he's done. Not only has he sinned and acted foolishly, he has "sinned **greatly**" and acted "**very** foolishly." And so David asks the Lord, "please take away the iniquity of your servant." God apparently didn't answer David directly at that moment. He answered David through the prophet Gad.

11 When David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, 12 "Go and speak to David, 'Thus the LORD says, "I am offering you three things; choose for yourself one of them, which I may do to you.'""

God decided to give David three options; David had to choose his punishment/discipline. There's not a clear-cut option that's preferable to the other two, but David's reasoning is rather significant.

13 So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, "Shall seven 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 see what answer I shall return to Him who sent me."

David's three options were 1) seven years of famine (some manuscripts read three years; cf. 1 Chron. 21:12), 2) three months of being pursued by their enemies, or 3) three days of pestilence. This is similar to your mom telling you, "You can either spend the afternoon in your bedroom by yourself, or I'll give you a spanking and you can get it over with. . ." The difference, of course, is that God's options all involved death. This is tangible evidence of the "severity of God." It's a severe thing to punish sin with death. But "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

14 Then David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the LORD for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man."

The first two options would put David and his people at the mercy of other men. A famine would necessitate them hoping to secure food and supplies from nations who would probably just as soon see them starve. Being pursued by their enemies would probably end in a great

slaughter. And so David concluded that he'd rather "fall into the hand of the Lord" by accepting three days of pestilence/plague. It may be devastating, but it would be over in three days. But the deciding factor was that David understood that "[God's] mercies are great." He had no confidence that men would be merciful, but God's mercies are great.

The term translated "mercies" is most frequently used of God (35 out of 47 times in the OT). It is sometimes translated compassion or tender mercies. God's default attitude toward His people is that of compassion/mercy. For example, in Psalm 103:13 David wrote,

13 Just as a father has compassion on his children,  
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.

David understood that God had a father's heart toward him and his people. Like a good father, God disciplines His children – severely if necessary – but it's so that they will turn back to Him so that He can shower them with kindness. Yes, they would experience God's punishment for his sin, but they could also count on God's compassion when they turned back to Him. [This is an example of corporate solidarity in OT – many pay for the sins of one. Corporate solidarity is not absent in NT but it doesn't seem to be as prevalent.]

David chooses pestilence from the hand of God, and that's what Israel got.

15 So the LORD sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning until the appointed time; and seventy thousand men of the people from Dan to Beersheba died.16 When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented from the calamity, and said to the angel who destroyed the people, "It is enough! Now relax your hand!" And the angel of the LORD was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

Before the "angel of the Lord" could destroy Jerusalem, God said "enough." We're told that the angel was by "the threshing floor" of a Jebusite man named Araunah. David then appeals to God to spare the people.

17 Then David spoke to the LORD when he saw the angel who was striking down the people, and said, "Behold, it is I who have sinned, and it is I who have done wrong; but these sheep, what have they done? Please let Your hand be against me and against my father's house."

Since the sin was his, David asked God to spare the people. Did you notice that David called the people of Jerusalem "these sheep"? He still has a shepherd's heart toward the people of God.

We next see the mercy of God toward David and the people when the prophet Gad tells David to erect an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite – on the very spot where God stayed the hand of the angel. There animals would be sacrificed to take away the sin and guilt of the people. God was ordaining a place and a means for dealing with sin.

The rest of the chapter records how Araunah offered to give the threshing floor to David along with oxen for a burnt offering and wood for the fire. David's response is significant (verse 24):

24 However, the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.

David wouldn't offer something to God that cost him nothing. We should have the same mindset when we bring offerings to God – whether financial giving, service, worship, or whatever: "I won't bring something to God that costs me nothing." God is worth our sacrifice. Verse 25 wraps up the book of 2 Samuel by saying:

25 And David built there an altar to the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Thus the LORD was moved by entreaty for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel.

The judgment of God (through the angel of the Lord) was replaced with atonement. Instead of experiencing the severity of God, the people could now experience the mercy of God through the sacrificial system. We're given an additional detail in 2 Chronicles 3:1 that confirms this. After David's death, guess where Solomon built the temple?

1 Then Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had prepared, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

(Ornan is apparently another name for Araunah.) Mount Moriah, the place where God provided an animal to be sacrificed as a substitute for Isaac (Genesis 22) and the place where the punishment of God was averted in David's day, was the location of the temple. There Israel had a permanent place to offer sacrifices – a place where they could experience the mercy of God.

***The Severity and Mercy of God today.*** We need to think carefully when we seek to apply a passage such as 2 Samuel 24. When we think about the severity of God, it's not as simple as saying, "If you trust in your own strength/might instead of God like David did, He's liable to wipe out everything you love." It's just not that simple.

I think that the foundational take-away from what we've seen today is that ***We should fear God's severity so that we can experience His mercy.*** We should live with the realization that our heavenly Father once sent a plague that wiped out 70,000 people. It's not the case that God was in a bad mood back then. No, God's severity is a reflection of the sinfulness of sin. God's severity reminds us that the wages of sin is death. This suggests that we should cultivate what the Bible calls "the fear of the Lord." We should have a healthy fear of being at odds with God and His will. Therefore, we align our lives with His will so that we can experience His mercy.

In Romans 11 Paul has a discussion of the "kindness and severity of God." In Romans 9 through 11 Paul is discussing with a predominantly Gentile audience, the Romans, how it could be that so few of the Jewish people had come to faith in Christ. In Romans 11:20-22 Paul writes that it was solely because of unbelief. Paul develops the image of the "people of God" as an olive tree.

Initially the tree was comprised of the Jewish people; therefore, those Jews who refused to believe in Jesus are like branches that have been broken off.

20 Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you. 22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.

Paul wants us to behold (“look at”) the “kindness and severity of God” so that we will experience His kindness. We are to *flee* from the things that would invite God’s severity/discipline/judgment and run toward the things that invite God’s kindness. In other words, we would be wise to cultivate “the fear of the Lord.”

John Piper, pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, comments on this passage ([www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org))

There's a reason why people run away from scenes of terror in real life, but still go to movies to see the same terror. There's a reason why no one wants to fall out of an airplane, but they will pay money at [an amusement park] for the same sensation of falling. The reason is that we were created to be safely afraid of God. Everything else is an echo of this truth. We were made to be safely afraid of God, because when we are safely afraid of God—when there is no condemnation and we know that he is our Father and our Friend—then what remains in fear of God is deeply pleasant.

The severity of God is just as real today as in David’s day. But if you have trusted in Jesus alone, you can be safely afraid of God. You will find it deeply pleasant. Can there be any doubt that God wants us to experience His mercy and not His severity? That’s why Jesus died for our sins. That’s why He sent His Spirit to lead us through this life, to convict us of sin, and to empower us for obedience. That’s why we should turn to Him in repentance and seek Him with a whole heart.

#### NOTES:

1. The only reason that we know that the plague in 2 Samuel 24 was God’s judgment for David’s sin is because it’s revealed to us. We don’t know whether people who experience an outbreak of cholera or a tsunami or an earthquake in our day are experiencing God’s judgment or are merely experiencing the type of suffering that is common to all. We just don’t know.
2. The cross of Christ fundamentally changes the way we think about the severity and mercy of God. The temple that Solomon built on the threshing floor of Araunah foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. At the temple, an animal could be brought and sacrificed as your substitute; instead of you being killed for your sins, the animal was killed (“the wages of sin is death. . .”). But those sacrifices had to be brought year after year. Jesus, the “lamb of God,” was sacrificed once-for-all; He was the final sacrifice for sin. Jesus is our propitiation; the wrath of God that we deserved fell on Him.