

# OpenTheo

## September 6th: 2 Samuel 24 & Ephesians 4:17-32

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David's sinful numbering of the people. Put off the old man and put on the new.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

2 Samuel 24. Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, Go number Israel and Judah. So the king said to Joab the commander of the army who was with him, Go through all the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people.

But Joab said to the king, 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 it. But why does my lord the king delight in this thing? But the king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army. 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 Aroah and from the city that is in the middle of the valley toward Gad and on to Jezo. Then they came to Gilead and to Kadesh in 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 of Israel.

There were eight hundred thousand valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand. 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 answer 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, and there died of the people from Dan to Beersheba seventy thousand 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 among the people, It is enough, now stay your hand. And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Arunah 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 Gad came that day to David and said to him, Go up, raise an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite.

So David went up at Gad's word as the Lord commanded. And when Arunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. And Arunah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground.

And Arunah 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 Arunah said to David, Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him. 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, Arunah gives to the king. And Arunah said to the king, May the Lord your God accept you. But the king said to Arunah, 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 fifty 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. The story of David's sinful census in 2 Samuel chapter 24 is a strange story in several respects. It also raises the question of why the books of Samuel would conclude on such a peculiar note.

Understanding scripture can often be like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. You need to pay attention both to the image upon and to the shape and the position of the pieces. Likewise, when reading scripture we'll often find that properly placing a piece, as it were, and relating it to other pieces, requires attention both to structural and to larger literary dimensions of the text, as well as to its theological and narrative content.

If you're anything like me, when you're doing a jigsaw puzzle one of the first things that you look for are the corner and the edge pieces. One of the keys to the reading of 2 Samuel chapter 24 is the fact that it is akin to a corner piece of the text of the books of Samuel. It is the concluding chapter, which suggests that it might be especially important.

It is also part of discernible internal structures, such as that of the concluding section of the book of 2 Samuel, which itself has a book-ended or chiasmic structure. As Peter Lighthouse notes, within this concluding section we should readily perceive parallels between chapter 21 and the famine in the land in this chapter. Both chapters concern the sin of a king and the consequent judgment upon the people and the land.

In both cases successful sacrifice and atonement is made for the land, both using the same expression to refer to the end of the judgment in their concluding verse. 2 Samuel chapter 21 verse 14, and after that God responded to the plea for the land. In chapter 24 verse 25, so the Lord responded to the plea for the land and the plague was averted from Israel.

One of the three options of punishment that the Lord gives to David in this chapter was also the punishment that came upon the land due to the sin of Saul, three years of famine. Seeing the structural parallels and the parallels between the content of these chapters, we will also be alert to the contrasts, to the ways in which when juxtaposed certain divergent details stand out from them as especially worthy of note. A prominent theme throughout this concluding section has been the character of true kingship.

In chapter 21 David had to deal with the consequences of the sin of Saul concerning the

Gibeonites and the judgment that fell upon the land as a result of it. In chapter 22 David's psalm reflected on the Lord's deliverance and vindication of the righteous king. In chapter 23 David delivered a final oracle concerning true kingship.

Now in chapter 24 David deals with the consequences of his own sin in the census. Another crucial theme that binds the whole books of Samuel together, appearing at the beginning and at the end, is the theme of the house of the Lord. Near the beginning of the story of 1 Samuel the Ark of the Covenant is taken by the Philistines.

Now at the end of the book the land for the temple is finally purchased and we have an anticipation of its importance as a place where successful atonement will be made for the land and the people and God's judgment will be arrested. The story begins with the Lord being angry with Israel and inciting David to number them. In 1 Chronicles chapter 21 verse 1 we have one of the most startling apparent biblical contradictions as in its account of the same events we read, Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.

There are however a number of ways to deal with the apparent contradiction. First, Satan might well have been the means by which God judged Israel. God can incite people to actions by means of other parties as we also see in 1 Kings chapter 22 verses 20 to 22.

And the Lord said, Who will entice Ahab that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, I will entice him. And the Lord said to him, By what means? And he said, I will go out and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.

And he said, You are to entice him, and you shall succeed. Go out and do so. The Lord could have used Satan in such a manner.

Second, another possibility is that the word translated Satan here is not in fact a proper name, but refers more generally to an adversary. David is incited to number the people, presumably as a threatening adversary is raised up against them. However, as we hear nothing more about the adversary, perhaps we should consider the possibility that it was a weak pretext for a significant overreach on David's part.

This still leaves the question of why the Lord would incite David to sin in such a manner anyway. If we didn't have verse 10, we might perhaps argue that David himself wasn't sinning, but simply that the census was a means by which Israel were brought into judgment. Verse 1 doesn't say that the Lord was angry with David, but that he was angry with Israel, and that David was incited against them.

However, while the Lord's inciting of David might have been a result cheaply of Israel's sin, David clearly sins in taking it. We should consider that there are situations when God

brings testing upon people as a judgment, to expose what is in their hearts, putting them in situations where their feet will slip and they will fail. The Lord's testing of David here is itself a judgment.

We pray lead us not into temptation, because we seek deliverance from any situation that might overwhelm our weak faith. However, those who are presumptuous and unfaithful can find that they are placed in such situations. The Lord himself does not tempt us, but he does expose the unfaithful to danger.

The judgment in this chapter comes upon David and the people after David takes the census. This might surprise us. Why would this be considered such a severe sin? Indeed, why would it be considered a sin at all? The first thing to consider is that the census was a military census, not a more general numbering.

David is mustering those suitable for military service. Considering 1 Chronicles 21 verse 1, this was most likely taken in response to a seeming threat of an enemy. A second thing to consider is the background in Exodus chapter 30 verses 11 to 16.

The Lord said to Moses, when you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the Lord when you number them, that there may be no plague among them when you number them. Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this, half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary. The shekel is 20 geras, half a shekel as an offering to the Lord.

Everyone who is numbered in the census from 20 years old and upward shall give the Lord's offering. The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than the half shekel when you give the Lord's offering to make atonement for their lives. You shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the Lord so as to make atonement for your lives.

This passage suggests that taking a census of the Lord's people was an inherently dangerous thing to do. David's census suffers a judgment that might be associated with sacrilege. Perhaps he failed to observe the proper procedure.

The law of Exodus might give us some insight into why taking a census was such a serious matter. The law warns against the danger of a plague when the Lord's people are wrongly numbered and the law tells them that atonement must be made for their lives. Why might this be the case? In such a census the Lord's people were being reckoned up both by numbering of their leaders but also by the Lord.

A census was a presentation of the people for assessment as it were and unless this were undertaken appropriately and with care judgment might fall upon them. They were being inspected and unless atonement were made for them they would be brought to

the attention of the Lord for punishment. Of course if the Lord was already angry with Israel as we see he was here a census of the would be an extremely dangerous thing.

A third thing to consider here is further possible background in the narrative of the Exodus. Peter Lighheart observes the importance of the language of plague here and the way that it recalls that Exodus background. We should also consider the role played by the destroying angel.

Pharaoh had taken the Lord's people and unless he lets them go plagues would come upon him. David might be doing the same thing here treating the people of the Lord as if it was his right to muster them. A fourth consideration is the fact that the serious judgment that fell upon the land in chapter 21 occurred due to Saul's attack upon the Gibeonites who were the servants of the Lord charged with chopping wood and carrying water for the tabernacle.

The Gibeonites came under the Lord's special protection. Again this might help to give us some clue into what is occurring in this chapter when the Lord severely judges David for taking a census. It might strengthen the explanation that David is judged for claiming the right to treat the people as his own possession.

A fifth consideration is raised by David Firth who notes that the terminology employed for the census suggests the possibility that David is not merely numbering the people for a battle but is registering them for future administrative purposes making a claim upon the people of the Lord that he does not have the right to make. A final key thing to bear in mind is that Joab seeks to discourage David from the census recognising that it is wrong. David also recognises his sin and repents of it before he is ever confronted by the Lord.

The sin, whatever it is, is not mysterious to them. It seems most likely to me that David took an external enemy as a pretext for making an excessive claim over the Lord's people, registering them for his own purposes. In the actual numbering we see the extent of David's dominion at the time.

The territory of Israel seems to stretch into Phoenician territory. It's extensive in the Transjordan as well. There are 1.3 million fighting men, divided between Judah which has 500,000 and Israel which has 800,000.

The numbers given are different in 1 Chronicles chapter 21 which also claims that Benjamin and Levi were excluded from the numbering by Joab. Various ways of harmonising these texts have been suggested although none is very straightforward. The divide mentioned between Israel and Judah here is significant.

While here its purpose may be primarily administrative, it reminds us again of the fault line along which the nation will later split. If there were this many fighting men, there

might have been four or five times as many people as that in the land itself. It gives us an impression of how great the nation had become, and numerous people, near the height of their power.

David, although he had ignored warnings, warnings that came somewhat unexpectedly from Joab, later was struck by his conscience and confessed his sin to the Lord. The Lord sends the prophet Gad to him the next morning with three choices of punishment. Three years of famine, three months of pursuit by his enemies, or three days of pestilence.

David chose the last of these three. We should note the contrast between the sevenfold punishment that came upon Saul's house for his sin concerning the Gibeonites and the threefold punishment that came upon David. The threefold punishment might be a result of David's confession.

If he confesses, the punishment is lessened. David chose the punishment that came most directly from the hand of the Lord. 70,000 people were struck down, but the plague was halted as the destroying angel stayed his hand over Jerusalem, ceasing his destruction by the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite.

David interceded for the people. As the shepherd, the judgment for David's sin was falling upon his flock, much as the judgment for his sin concerning Bathsheba and Uriah. The prophet Gad then instructed David to establish an altar on the threshing floor.

The chapter ends with David purchasing the threshing floor in a transaction that should remind us of Abraham's purchase of the field and the cave of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite back in Genesis chapter 23. Arunah the Jebusite is presumably one of the Canaanites who formerly possessed Jerusalem before David drove them out. Just as Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah was a hugely significant first parcel of the inheritance, this is the crowning part of the inheritance.

It is on Mount Moriah, associated with the place where the angel of the Lord had stayed the hand of Abraham back in Genesis chapter 22, as we read in verse 14 of that chapter. So Abraham called the name of that place the Lord will provide, as it is said to this day, on the mount of the Lord it shall be provided. The full importance of this purchase becomes plain in 2nd Chronicles chapter 3 verse 1. Then Solomon began to build a house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to David his father at the place that David had appointed on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

By this point we should hopefully have a clearer idea why this particular story is placed where it is, taken out of chronological sequence and placed as the very conclusion of the book of 2nd Samuel. The story of the books of Samuel began with the tabernacle facing destruction and dismantling on account of Israel's sin. Now, at the very end of the book, the land for the great building of the temple where things will finally get put back

together again is purchased.

In this purchase the story of Israel has finally reached a key landmark. The historical importance of the site as the place where the Lord stopped the plague upon Israel underlines the significance of the location. This is the place to which Israel can always return to find atonement and the staying of God's hand of judgment.

This is the site of mercy and forgiveness. This is the site of God's favor and grace. A question to consider, what significance might there be in the fact that this key site is a threshing floor? Ephesians chapter 4 verses 17-32 Now this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ, assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Having spoken of the oneness of the people of God in the body of Christ, in the second half of Ephesians chapter 4, Paul turns to address the change in life and behavior that should occur in Christians.

Like several other parts of Ephesians, we should notice the parallels between this section and corresponding sections in the book of Colossians, such as in chapter 3 verse 8 to 13. But now you must put them all away, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.



Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free. But Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another, and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Being in Christ should entail a radical and far-reaching transformation of life. Paul's teaching concerning the unity and character of the body of Christ, in which we are growing to maturity as we are formed by the triune God, will lead to a radically different form of life from that characteristic of the Gentiles. The Gentiles have a form of life that is shaped by the futility of their minds.

Their minds are vain and lacking in substance. They are not acting in terms of the truth of reality in God's world. They are out of touch with the weighty and substantial things of life.

Having rejected God, no matter how smart they are, they are unable to gain mental purchase upon the things that really matter. Their understanding is shrouded in darkness. They may be living in the real world, but they are living in it as if under the cover of thick blackness, clumsily bumping into things, stumbling over unseen obstacles, and wandering about they know not where.

They are alienated from God due to the ignorance and stubbornness of their hearts. Their ignorance arises from a fundamental aversion and resistance to God. This resistance has led them to become callous and to surrender themselves to growing forms of wickedness, as they willingly enslave themselves to their own desires.

This couldn't contrast more with that which should characterize the Christian. Paul describes the source of our new way of life as having learned Christ. This is a very strange way of speaking.

In what other case would you speak of having learned a person? You might well talk about having learned about a person, perhaps, but that is not what Paul says here. Paul gives us a sense of what he means by this in the clause that follows. We learn Christ by hearing about him, but more particularly by being taught in him.

As Marcus Barthes powerfully expresses it, Jesus Christ is the headmaster, the teaching matter, the method, the curriculum, and the academy. Learning Christ is unlike learning anything else, which is why Paul speaks in such an unusual manner here. The conclusion of verse 21 expresses something of this, as the truth is in Jesus, or since truth is in Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. If we are looking for truth, a proper way of behavior, and a new source of life, then we will find all of this in Jesus. In him are truthful ways of life.

From our knowledge of Christ as the truth, we learn to divest ourselves of the old ways of life that are contrary to him, ways of life that are no longer appropriate to us. They belong to our old selves and are ill-fitting upon us now. They are corrupt and decaying on account of deceitful desires.

The desires of this old self are themselves mired in lies and falsehood. They tangle us up in them in ways that we cannot easily understand or are not. They catch us up in the snares of death.

The first step is to put off the old self. Then we must be renewed in the spirit of our minds and clothe ourselves with a new and very different self, a new self that bears the likeness of God in righteousness and true holiness. Paul is intentionally alluding back to Genesis chapter 1 here.

God is restoring and perfecting us in his image. In Christ, humanity attains to its divinely intended form and destiny. Christ is the truth and the model of this humanity, and we must inhabit his life as the place where we learn how to live.

One of the most immediate results of this necessary putting off and putting on will be our abandonment of the falsehood fundamentally characteristic of our old lives. Such falsehood is not just an occasional feature. It's something that lies at the very heart of the character of the old way of life.

In its place, we must have a commitment to the truth. Paul makes a very similar point in Colossians chapter 3 verses 9 to 10. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

This practice and speaking of truth is informed and inspired by a new recognition of others in Christ. We are not detached individuals, but we are people who belong to each other, members of each other. The golden rule has a deeper logic to it in the body of Christ.

If we are members of each other, what we do to each other in the body of Christ is in some sense indirectly being done to ourselves. Paul is likely quoting from Zechariah chapter 8 verses 16 to 17 here, which speaks of the appropriate behavior for the restored people of God. These are the things that you shall do.

Speak the truth to one another. Render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace. Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the Lord.

This of course is to be seen in the church, where God is restoring humanity after exile and renewing us in his image. Quoting Psalm 4 verse 4, Paul recognizes the appropriateness and perhaps even unavoidability of some forms of anger. However, we

must carefully hold our anger within bounds, lest it get out of control.

One of the ways to do this is to settle matters before we go to sleep. Unaddressed anger can fester, it can cause breaches that cannot easily be healed. Keeping short accounts with God and our neighbors is a way to lessen the dangers in this area.

It also has the effect of closing off opportunities of which the devil will take advantage. He loves to use such openings to destroy relationships and render people bitter. We must accordingly deal with anger swiftly and without delay.

Paul's teaching concerning sin is not just basic instruction, it contains a lot of wisdom. Not letting the sun go down on your anger is a very practical way to deal with our tendencies to anger. His teaching is designed to limit Satan's opportunities.

With people tempted to steal, he encourages them to commit themselves to honest labor instead, and to learn what it means to give as an alternative. As in the wisdom literature, Paul is especially attentive to speech. Speech can corrupt, it can serve as a channel of death and the tearing down of others.

In its place, Paul wants Christians to learn to speak in ways that build people up, in ways that are suitable to the season, and in ways that function as a gift that lifts up and strengthens those who hear us, so that they might be blessed by our words. Christ has given us his Holy Spirit, marking us out for final resurrection, and giving us a reality filled promise of what we are to expect. However, it is possible to live in a way that grieves the Spirit.

In Isaiah chapter 63 verses 9-10, to which Paul is likely alluding here, Isaiah speaks of the Holy Spirit being grieved, and God turning to oppose his people as an enemy. There are several occasions in the New Testament where the genuine possibility of the most devastating loss is hinted at or stated. We must not be presumptuous in our reception of God's grace.

Paul concludes the chapter by listing things to be put away, and contrasting attitudes and behaviors to adopt. The old divisive patterns of life of the flesh must be abandoned. These are forms of behavior that led us to bite and devour each other.

In their place, we must adopt new ways of life that we have learned in Christ, patterns of life that he himself has modeled for us. These divine traits, kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness, would not be the most prominent virtues for many of Paul's Greco-Roman contemporaries, if they would have been considered virtues at all. However, in the Gospel, they are seen in Christ, and they are virtues that should be characteristic of those who have learned Christ.

A question to consider. The themes of truth and falsehood are prominent in this section. How does Paul's account of these things challenge typical ways of thinking about them?

