

Ash Wednesday; March 2, 2022
2 Samuel 24:10-25
"His Mercy is Great"

David had a guilty conscience after he had counted the fighting men. So David said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But, LORD, please take away the guilt of your servant, because I have acted very foolishly."

When David got up in the morning, the word of the LORD came to Gad the prophet, David's seer. The LORD said, "Go tell David, 'This is what the LORD says. I am laying out three choices before you. Choose one of them for yourself, and I will carry it out against you.'"

So Gad went to David and told him about this. He said, "Shall seven years of famine in your land come upon you, or three months of fleeing with your enemies pursuing you, or three days of plague in your land? Now consider this and decide what answer I should return to the one who sent me."

David said to Gad, "This puts me in a difficult position. Please! Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great. But do not let me fall into the hands of man."

So the LORD sent a plague against Israel from the next morning until the appointed time. Seventy thousand people from Dan to Beersheba died. The angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, but the LORD relented and did not bring the disaster. He said to the angel who was carrying out the destruction among the people, "Enough. Now hold back your hand."

The angel of the LORD was near the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

David said to the LORD, as he was watching the angel strike the people, "Look! I am the one who sinned. I am guilty. But these sheep – what have they done? Let your hand be against me and against the house of my father."

Gad came to David on that day and said to him, "Go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." So David went up and obeyed God's instructions as the LORD had commanded.

Araunah looked up and saw the king and his servants coming toward him. So Araunah went out and bowed down to the king with his face to the ground, and he said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?"

David said, "To purchase the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, so the plague will be held back from the people."

Araunah said to David, "My lord the king can take it and offer whatever seems good to him. Here are oxen for the burnt offering, as well as the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. O King, Araunah is giving all this to the king." Araunah also said to the king, "The LORD your God will accept you."

But the king answered Araunah, "No. I insist on purchasing it from you for what it is worth. I will not offer to the LORD my God burnt offerings that I did not pay for."

So David purchased the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. He built an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and fellowship offerings there. The LORD heard the requests for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel.

Do you know how much money you have in the bank? Not all the way down to the penny. But do you have a rough idea? Probably you should. And if you have no clue how much money you have, there is a good chance you're not being a very good manager of the money God has given you.

Do you know how healthy you are? Not every detail of your health, of course. No one can know that. But you should have a general idea of what kind of shape you're in, and what challenges (if any) you're facing. And if you have no clue about the state of your health, there is a good chance you're being a bad steward of the body God gave you, after knitting it together fearfully and wonderfully.

So: Do you think the king of Israel should know how many men in his kingdom can fight? Well, King David is their commander-in-chief. Not only that, but the Lord has given David these fighting men to protect the people and to expand the territory of God's chosen nation. These warriors are David's weapon to fight for the nation carrying the Lord's promise of a Savior. Wouldn't you agree David should know how many fighters there are? Could we even say that not knowing would make him a lousy king, a negligent leader of God's nation?

David wants to know. And he summons Joab, his top commander, to make a count. David tells Joab, **"Travel through all the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba and register the fighting men. Then I will know how many there are."** Joab is many things. Oblivious is not one of them. And there is something in David's command that makes Joab recoil. This is more than a responsible king making sure his nation is well-protected. Listen to Joab's answer: **"The LORD your God will make the people a hundred times larger, however many they may be, and the eyes of my lord the king will see it. But why does my lord the king have such a strong desire to do this?"** Joab smells something rotten in David's command to count the fighting men.

David is getting up there in years. He has nothing to prove to anyone. He has ruled Israel as a strong and God-pleasing king for nearly forty years. He's made his mistakes, some terrible. But he's done really well as Israel's king. He's the best king they'll ever have, and it's not even close. David has just completed his final major military campaign, against Israel's pesky arch-enemy, the Philistines. David won. He won big.

So, what do you think Joab sees in David's command that makes Joab flinch? The writer of 1 Chronicles goes this far: **The king's directive was offensive to Joab.** Why would a winner who just finished a winning campaign, a successful king reaching the end of his reign want to know how many fighters he has? Pride. "Look at me, Israel. Look how great and powerful I am."

That pride also smells bad to the Lord. Especially since it is ultimately the Lord who has made David such a great king, and the Lord who has given Israel victory over the Philistines. All success comes from God. This is a truth the people of Israel quickly forget. After their victory over the Philistines, we hear not a blip of thanksgiving from Israel to the Lord. They just go straight into enjoying the peaceful prosperity following the win. The last thing that thankless, proud people need is a proud king who glorifies himself instead of the Lord. David is a leader. His people need him to set an example of thankfulness and humility. That makes his proud command stink double in the Lord's nostrils.

Despite his reservations, Joab takes the census. (Turns Israel has about one and a half million fighting men, which is a massive amount for any nation at this time in history.) But now that the census is complete, even David recognizes his pride and thanklessness that spawned it: **David had a guilty conscience after he had counted the fighting men. So David said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But, LORD, please take away the guilt of your servant, because I have acted very foolishly."**

But enough about David, for a while. Let's talk about you some more. So...do you know how many dollars you have? Do you know the status of your health? How much your house is worth? Hopefully you do. But the more important question is: why do you know those things? Do you know them because you recognize your wealth and health as God's gifts and you want to be a good manager of his gifts and use them well in his service? Or do you know them for the same reason David knows the number of his warriors?

I speak to a congregation with a lot of people like King David. David is a winner. He's a success. And he's got more miles behind than in front of him. Many of you are like that, and I have a feeling the children of this church will be like that one day. David forgets that all success comes from God. And he looks on his resources with pride and thanklessness. Do we ever look at what we have that way? Do we ever look at our money, our homes, our cars and say, "Look at me. Look how great I am."

David's pride stinks to Joab and to the Lord. So does ours. David recognizes his own and repents. We pray: God, help us see our own pride and thanklessness for the blessings and successes that come from you. May we join our hearts to David's and pray: **But, Lord, please take away the guilt of your servants, because we have acted very foolishly.**

We know how the Lord answers David's prayer for forgiveness, and we know how he answers ours. For pride, for thanklessness, for every sin, the Lord answers with the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, which purifies us from all sin. In the same city King David prayed for forgiveness, the King of kings came centuries later to earn it. Very near the threshing floor where we'll watch David build an altar, the Lord built an altar of his own. His altar was in the shape of a cross. We'll watch David make a sacrifice to the Lord. But the Lord has also made a sacrifice for us. The Lord forgives David's sin, and he forgives ours.

But it is also the Lord's purpose to discipline his people, so that they will not repeat their mistakes. What follows in this story is not punishment for David's sin. It is consequence; it is discipline to curb whatever pride remains in his heart, so that it will not show itself again. If the discipline seems severe (and it is!), we should learn from it just how much God detests human pride and thanklessness, and how seriously we should take his command to stifle it.

When David got up in the morning, the word of the LORD came to Gad the prophet, David's seer. The LORD said, "Go tell David, 'This is what the LORD says. I am laying out three choices before you. Choose one of them for yourself, and I will carry it out against you.'"

So Gad went to David and told him about this. He said, "Shall seven years of famine in your land come upon you, or three months of fleeing with your enemies pursuing you, or three days of plague be in your land? Now consider this and decide what answer I should return to the one who sent me."

David said to Gad, "This puts me in a difficult position. Please! Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great. But do not let me fall into the hands of men."

The Lord disciplines severely because human pride is severely sinful and spiritually dangerous. It attacks faith in God and places faith in ourselves. It must be rooted out completely before it infests believers' hearts and destroys their faith. If you want to know why the Lord disciplines all of Israel instead of just David, remember that Israel has also shown pride and thanklessness following their victory over the Philistines. David is their leader, but he is far from the only one struggling with the pride that God hates. All Israel needs a severe, memorable lesson.

If you want to know why the Lord gives David these three specific choices for discipline, you will have to forward your question to God. I do not know. But I do know that, when faced with three dreadful options, David chooses wisely. God is more merciful than nature, so David shies away from famine. God is more merciful than humans, so David shies away enemy attack. He chooses an attack directly from the Lord **for his mercy is great.**

The Lord fully and freely forgives sins to all who repent and turn to Christ. David knows this. God is merciful. He chooses discipline directly from the Lord, hoping God's mercy will prevail. And it quickly does: **So the LORD sent a plague against Israel from the next morning until the appointed time. Seventy thousand people from Dan to Beersheba died. The angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, but the LORD relented and did not bring the disaster. He said to the angel who was carrying out the destruction among the people, "Enough. Now hold back your hand."**

Seventy thousand deaths is indeed severe. But the Lord stops short of his capital city. Jerusalem is the most important city of God's nation. It is the home of the Lord's own temple. And it is the home of David, whom the Lord has forgiven. There, the Lord's mercy prevails. **"Enough."**

The Lord forgives sins freely. He does sometimes discipline us with consequences for our sins. Sometimes his discipline is severe. But it's purpose is loving. It's goal is to stop us from dwelling in faith-destroying sins. When the Lord disciplines you, call on him for mercy. Ask him to say, "Enough." And learn your lesson. You have been forgiven. Now go and sin no more.

That's what David does: **The angel of the LORD was near the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. David said to the LORD, as he was watching the angel striking the people, "Look! I am the one who sinned. I am guilty. But these sheep – what have they done? Please! Let your hand be against me and against the house of my father."** David now does what a leader should. Although the people do in fact share the blame, he takes it all for himself. He is becoming again the spiritual leader the Lord wants him to be.

And now he shows that the Lord has vanquished his pride: **Gad came to David on that day and said to him, "Go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." So David went up and obeyed Gad's instructions as the LORD had commanded.**

Araunah looked up and saw the king and his servants coming toward him. So Araunah went out and bowed down to the king with his face on the ground, and he said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" Araunah is not an Israelite by blood. But he apparently believes in the Lord, and he knows that when the king of Israel steps on your land, you better show some deference.

David said, "To purchase the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, so the plague will be held back from his people."

Araunah said to David, “My lord the king can take it and offer whatever seems good to him. Here are oxen for the burnt offering, as well as the threshing sledges and the yokes of oxen for the wood. O King, Araunah is giving all these to the king.” Araunah also told the king, “The LORD your God will accept you.”

Despite Araunah’s giving spirit and insistence that a donated offering will be perfectly good, David insists on sacrificing fully from himself. The Lord has forgiven David’s sin. The Lord is pulling back the plague from David’s people. So David will sacrifice his own animals from his own altar on his own land. **But the king said to Araunah, “No. I insist on purchasing it from you for what it is worth. I will not offer to the LORD my God burnt offerings that I did not pay for.”**

So David purchased the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels [about twenty ounces] of silver. He built an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and fellowship offerings there. The LORD heard the requests for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel.

The Lord’s mercy is great. The Lord has built his altar for you. On it he sacrificed his Son to take all your sins away. Now, like David, build an altar to the Lord. Sacrifice to him. And like David, sacrifice right. Sacrifice fully of yourself. God teaches us to offer our entire lives up to him as an offering. **Living sacrifices**, he calls us. When we sacrifice of ourselves, like David, we send a pleasing aroma up to God.

There is no end to the God-pleasing offerings we can make. But maybe tonight, in the light of this lesson, we can start here: Look at the success God has given you, whether a little or a lot, and just thank him for it. Look at the good things God has given you, whether a little or lot, and remember they come from him. Go ahead and count what you have. But not to serve your pride. Instead, to consider how you can use those gifts to serve God and others.

He forgives the stench of our pride and thanklessness, because his mercy is great. Now, send up a pleasing aroma, the sacrifice of thankfulness and humble service.

The Lord’s mercy is great. Amen.