

DISCIPLINED

2 Samuel 24:10-25

When we make major decisions, it is always best to make sure we know the reason for and consequences of those decisions. Many times we assume we know something and then that assumption becomes “truth” in our minds and we do things that make perfectly good sense based on that assumption, but “what is done” could prove to have an undesirable outcome which would have been predicted if the real truth had been known. It takes discipline to do all the background work that is needed to sort out the speculations and assumptions and rumors from the actual truth. Failure to exercise such voluntary discipline can lead to doing things that result in having to endure involuntary discipline as a corrective or punitive measure for the error.

The last chapter of Second Samuel and chapter 21 of First Chronicles present an account of David making a decision to “number” the people of Israel. Whatever was involved in this decision was not pleasing to God and there were consequences that impacted the entire nation. This was not the first time the entire nation had suffered for something those in leadership had done. We may recall that something Saul had done regarding the Gibeonites (2 Samuel 21) had resulted in a three-year famine that impacted Israel.

As background for our study we can compare the introduction of this account from the two resources and perhaps gains some insight as to what happened that resulted in David making the decision that he did. The first verse of our current chapter states the following in the NASB

“Now again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah.’”

Much of what was written in this verse seems very straightforward and we can understand most of it. The word “again” is probably a reference to the previously mentioned national famine that had plagued Israel. While we don’t know the timing of this decision, it would seem to be after the famine and after the other tribes (beside Judah) had embraced David as king since the numbering (or the census) was to include all the tribes.

We also see that there was a definite distinction being made between Judah and the other tribes in the thinking of the person who recorded this account. We know from the history of Israel that the separation became an irreparable physical schism following the death of Solomon.

Something or someone motivated David to initiate a census of the entire nation. Various translations indicate different possibilities. These possibilities range from “the Lord” (KJV of 2 Sam 24:1 – actually uses “he”) to “Satan” (KJV of 1 Chr 21:1). Young’s Literal Translation uses the English meaning of the Hebrew word found in First Chronicles and this word (in Hebrew) is *satan* (pronounced as saw-tawn) and literally, simply means “adversary” in English. This demonstrates a potential difficulty of using a transliteration of a foreign word rather than the English equivalent meaning of the word. In this case, we wind up thinking that anything or everything that may be detrimental to us is of the devil.

Albert Barnes in his *Notes on the Old and New Testaments* states that the first part of verse one can be taken as the heading for the entire chapter. What follows gives the details of what had occurred that caused God to be angry with David and Israel. He also noted that the source of David’s decision to number the people was likely an unnamed advisor in David’s court and not Satan since the Chronicles account should read “and an adversary” since no article (the) preceded the Hebrew word “*satan*” as was the case in the reference to Satan in Job 1:6 and 2:1.

David followed the advice of this “adversary” to number the people which turned out to be harmful to David and the people of Israel.

Confession – 24:10

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." 2 Samuel 24:10 (NASB95)

What caused David to come to the conclusion that he had sinned after the census was taken? It took nine months and 20 days to do the census. An argument could be made that it took that long for the words of Joab to finally register with David when he discouraged David from numbering the people. Joab's argument was that David did not need to know the number since the Lord would provide however many troops that would be needed by Israel and David already knew there were a lot of men – more than sufficient. David overruled Joab and ordered the census.

It could have been a realization by David that he had not sought the advice of the Lord but had followed the leading of one who was described as an adversary. After the numbers started coming in and there was such a large number of men available, David may have concluded that Joab was right and all that work did not need to be done.

Some have speculated that David was motivated by pride in that it would make him feel good to know how many people over which he ruled. Another possible motive was thought to be ambition. David may have been thinking about expanding the borders of Israel and wanted to know if his army was large enough to start such a campaign. The conclusion that he had sinned could have then been related to a conviction that such motives were not in keeping with the precepts and revealed purposes of God.

The answer as to why David concluded that he had sinned could simply be that the prophet Gad told him that he had. That is not readily obvious to us since verse ten precedes the account of Gad going to David. A technique used in Hebrew writing is that the subject and the significant point are sometimes stated and then the details are given in the information that follows the initial statement where (in this case) the consequences of the sin are given to David.

Consequences – 24:11-15

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 will do to you." ' " 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." 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." 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. 2 Samuel 24:11–15 (NASB95)

The retribution choices all seem to be very severe which would raise the question of what would trigger such "anger of the Lord" associated with the numbering of the people. Some commentators have said that the simple act of numbering the people was not the sin since the Lord had instructed Moses to do that as recorded in Exodus 30:12, Numbers 1:2 and 26:2. The Exodus account was associated with a payment of a half shekel for each of those included in the census. The numbering was for all males more than twenty years old. The payment was said to be an atonement for his soul so there would be no plague (destruction) among those numbered. The money was used in the service of the Tabernacle.

The census of Numbers chapter one did not mention the atonement money but there was an emphasis on those who were able to go to war and specifically did not include the Levites. The numbering mentioned in the latter part of Numbers was before Israel was about to invade Canaan. Again, there was no mention of any payment associated with this counting of the people.

The failure of David to collect an atonement payment has been suggested to be the reason for God's anger, but such a collection was apparently not done in the two occasions mentioned in Numbers. The New Bible Commentary points out that there is evidence that in the Ancient Near East a census was thought to be dangerous and likely to attract divine anger.

It then seems that the sin was probably related to David acting independently of any commandment of the Lord to take a census. Some suspect that David's motives were related to pride, self-confidence, ambition, and strengthening of the centralized government for Israel with forced military service. These latter concerns were the very things that Samuel warned the people of Israel would happen if they insisted on having a king like the other nations.

It is somewhat ironic that Solomon made use of the results of this census to organize forced labor groups that carried out the many building projects that he initiated during his reign as king.

Of the three choices one involved a long time period (seven years or three years) in which Israel would be exposed to a famine. A second option was an intermediate time period in which Israel would be exposed to the pursuit of their enemies. The third option was a short period of time of a plague or pestilence in which many would die from the actions of an angel. The third option was chosen by David since he was confident that the Lord would show mercy and David did not have such confidence in nature or the enemies of Israel.

According to the Septuagint, the plague lasted from morning until noon. It could have been as little as three hours and people died over all of Israel – from Dan to Beersheba. If learning of the great number of people available for military service was a source of pride for David, then the loss of seventy thousand of those numbered would have surely brought humility.

Compassion – 24:16-17

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. 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." 2 Samuel 24:16-17 (NASB95)

This set of verses may be an example of the literary style in which the outcome is first stated as introductory comments and the actions leading up to the significant results are then presented. If that is the case, then the order of events would have been that the Lord enabled David to have spiritual vision to see the angel who was carrying out the plague by the threshing floor in the Jerusalem area. David then cried out in confession to the Lord and pleaded that the people be spared and that the punished be directed toward himself and his family. This was a plea similar to that which Moses made on behalf of the people when they sinned by worshiping the golden calves.

David's confession, repentance and intercession on behalf of the people were effective in that the destruction was restrained at that point. (If the events happened in the sequence recorded, then the pause of the plague was entirely attributable to the mercy and compassion of the Lord and David made his confession and intercession only after the destruction was put on hold and not before.)

Contrition – 24:18-25

¹⁸ So Gad came to David that day and said to him, "Go up, erect an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." ¹⁹ David went up according to the word of Gad, just as the LORD had commanded. ²⁰ Araunah looked down and saw the king and his servants crossing over toward him; and Araunah went out and

bowed his face to the ground before the king. ²¹ Then Araunah said, “Why has my lord the king come to his servant?” And David said, “To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be held back from the people.” ²² Araunah said to David, “Let my lord the king take and offer up what is good in his sight. Look, the oxen for the burnt offering, the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. ²³ “Everything, O king, Araunah gives to the king.” And Araunah said to the king, “May the LORD your God accept you.” 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. ²⁵ David built there an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Thus the LORD was moved by prayer for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel. 2 Samuel 24:18–25 (NASB95)

The final action associated with this census account was to erect an altar and offer a burnt offering sacrifice at the place where David saw the angel. There are other accounts where altars were built and sacrifices made following divine encounters with an angel of the Lord. The first altar Abram built when he arrived in the promised land was after the Lord appeared to him. Jacob built an altar after the Lord appeared to him as he was fleeing from Esau. Moses built an altar to the Lord after his encounter on with the Lord on the mountain. Gideon built an altar to the Lord and offered a sacrifice when the angel of the Lord appeared to him to call him to action to deliver Israel from the Midianites.

There was an interesting interchange between David and Araunah who owned the place where the altar was to be built. Araunah (who was not an Israelite) was fearful when he saw the king approaching since he had no way to know the purpose of the visit and kings had so much power over the people. When Araunah learned the reason for the visit, he was overly cooperative in offering to not only freely give the property but also to provide the animals for the sacrifice.

David was not going to take advantage of those subject to him but acted in a just manner to compensate the owner for his property and for the animals. David’s reason for not accepting the gift but insisting that he pay for it was essentially that an offering that does not cost us something is not really a sacrifice. The amount David gave for the threshing floor and the oxen was said to be fifty shekels. We learn from the Chronicles account that David gave an additional 600 gold shekels for the land around the threshing floor.

The reason David gave for offering sacrifices at the place where he saw the angel was so that the plague (destruction) may be held back from the people. What we read in verse sixteen regarding the Lord’s command to the angel to stop was apparently a temporary pause in the plague. As we see following the burnt offering sacrifice that the plague was held back from Israel. In the Chronicles account, it is written that the angel put his sword back into its sheath following the sacrifice.

Two sacrifices were offered to the Lord that day. The first was the burnt offering which was for atonement regarding the sin(s) committed and the second was a peace offering as an expression of thanksgiving for the end of the plague. We know that the offerings were acceptable to God since we are told in 1 Chronicles 21:26 that “David built there an altar to the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, and called on the LORD; and He answered him from heaven by fire on the altar of burnt offering.”

Following this significant event, David became convinced that this was the place offerings should be made to the Lord rather than Gibeon where the Tabernacle was located. There were ongoing sacrifices made at this place which was close to or identical with the location where Abraham offered up Isaac 800 years earlier and was eventually the site of the Temple that Solomon built.

The lessons we can take away from this account are that we always need to follow the

prompting of the Lord as we begin new things. If we think something needs to be done, we should always seek to know the Lord's will in the matter. If our motives for doing something are contrary to the character of the Lord, then that would be a good reason to cancel the action. If we find that we have erred, then confessing our sins and availing ourselves of God's provision for atonement are appropriate. It is also encouraging to learn that even when we miss the mark that God can use what happened for His purposes.