

David's Confusing Finish (2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21)

Big Idea: God is wrathful, sovereign, just, and merciful.

I've got to be honest. Today's passage is among the hardest that I've ever preached. I'm a little scared by the question and response time at the end, because this sermon may raise more questions than I have answers!

The story we're looking at today is found twice in the Bible in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21.

I want to look at it for two reasons.

First, because some of you are going to read it this week in your Bible reading, and it's going to confuse you, so it's good to talk about it rather than skip over it.

Second, because this is a good case study of how to handle a tough passage. We're going to learn a couple of principles in this passage that will help us deal with other tough passages. The two principles are this:

- Principle One: Ask the question, "What does this passage teach me about God?" This question helps us with so many of the tough passages that we deal with, including this one.
- Principle Two: Begin with what we do know rather than focusing on what we don't know. This passage will leave us with a lot of questions, but that's okay, because if we focus on what we do know in this passage, it will help us, even if we still have some unanswered questions at the end.

So let's do this. This passage is a tough one, but there are some things that we learn about God for sure that we all need to know. What does this passage teach us about God? Four things.

One: God gets angry.

This chapter is uncomfortable because it talks a lot about God's anger. When we're confused about a passage, a good question is always, "What does this passage teach me about God?" And one of the things that this passage teaches us so clearly is that God is a God who gets angry. The wrath of God is the behind almost every detail of the chapter.

Take, for instance, verse 1: "Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them..." Why was God angry at them? We don't know, but he was. And then look at verse 15: "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 70,000 men." God's anger is real, and it is fierce.

And that gives us trouble. We don't like to think about God's wrath. It's a theme all throughout the Bible, but we don't like it. If the Bible doesn't shy away from it, neither should we.

Nahum says:

*The LORD is a jealous and avenging God;
the LORD is avenging and wrathful;
the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries
and keeps wrath for his enemies.*

*The LORD is slow to anger and great in power,
and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty.
(Nahum 1:2-3)*

What does it mean that God gets angry?

It doesn't mean that God flies off the handle. God doesn't have temper tantrums. J.I. Packer [explains](#), "God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil. God is only angry where anger is called for."

That hints at why God gets angry. God gets angry because his anger is the flip side of his love. Becky Pippert [explains](#), "Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference. . . . God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer . . . which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being."

I need to ask you: have you come to understand God as a God who is angry with sin? Until you do, you don't understand who God really is. If we are going to worship the God of the Bible, we have to come to terms with a God who is slow to anger, but who does get angry with a pure and holy wrath.

Here's the second thing we learn about God in this passage. Not only is God holy, but:

Two: God is sovereign.

This one is confusing at first.

Verse 1 says: "Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, 'Go, number Israel and Judah.'" We read that and have so many questions. How could God incite David to do something that, it becomes clear later in the chapter, is wrong? And what's wrong with taking a census anyway?

It becomes even harder to understand when you read the account of these events in 1 Chronicles 21, which says, "Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel." You have David taking an action, but the authors reveal that both God and Satan were behind that action. So which is it? Was David a puppet? Was it God or Satan behind the action? It's all so confusing!

But it doesn't have to be.

There's another passage that helps me understand this. In 2 Corinthians, Paul talks about what he calls a thorn in the flesh, a term that describes some kind of suffering that he has to endure. We don't know what it was, but Paul didn't like it. Paul calls it "a messenger of Satan to harass me" (2 Corinthians 12:7). But then he says that God is using it to keep him from being conceited, and when he asks God to take it away, God says no.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Corinthians 12:8-9)

Paul says that this thorn was given to him, and the implication is that it was given and used by God. But he also says it was a messenger from Satan given to harass him. It's also like the book of Job, where Satan harasses Job but Satan can't do anything that God doesn't allow.

There are so many passages in the Bible that say the same thing. This comes up in Joseph's story, where people meant evil, but God meant it for good. Or even in the crucifixion of Jesus. Peter says that Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God," and yet at the same time, "you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23).

The Bible teaches us that there is no contradiction at all between God's sovereignty, Satan's actions, and human agency. This actually becomes very good news for us: Even Satan serves God's purposes. In everything that happens, God is working out his purposes *without* turning us into puppets. We act freely. Satan is at work to try to destroy us. God is sovereign over all of it, and somehow is using all of this to work out his purposes. As John Woodhouse puts it:

Divine sovereignty does not diminish human responsibility; neither does human responsibility diminish divine sovereignty. The Lord had his purpose in what he incited David to do, without compromising David's responsibility for what he did.

How does all of this work? There are theories out there, but in the end, nobody knows. Isaiah 55:8-9 says:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts
(Isaiah 55:8-9)*

We don't have to understand all of this to be grateful that God is in control of this world, that everything is working out according to his plan, and that God can even take the intentions of Satan and our evil actions to accomplish his purposes in the world. This is very good news for us when we feel like the world is out of control.

So God is wrathful. He's sovereign. Here's the third thing we learn in this passage:

Three: God is just.

It becomes clear that David's actions are wrong. Even Joab, who's a bit of a scoundrel, tries to stop him in verse 3. But David gets his way. The whole process takes ten months. It's only when it's completed that David realizes that he's done wrong.

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."
(24:10)

What was wrong with David's actions? We don't know. People have theories. One of them is that David was relying on his military strength rather than on God. Maybe it betrayed a lack of trust in God. But we just don't know. The text doesn't tell us.

And here's the hard part for us: we don't have to know. We don't always know the reasons why God says something is wrong, and that can be hard for us. But when God says something is wrong, he is just and we can trust him.

Elisabeth Elliott, a great missionary and Christian writer, once summed up what she learned with her entire life as this:

God is God. If He is God, He is worthy of my worship and my service. I will find rest nowhere but in His will, and that will is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to.

We don't have to understand all that he says. God doesn't owe us any explanations. But we can trust him, because he is God, and he is good.

How good is he? God gives David the choice of what he will suffer for his sin:

- Years of famine
- Months of losing a war
- Days of pestilence

Each punishment was shorter than the one before. But each punishment was presumably more intense than the one before.

Which one would he choose? David didn't choose by length of time or by the intensity of the punishment. David chose the three days of pestilence because he would rather fall into God's hands than in the hands of a foreign army. David says, "I am in great distress. Let us fall into the hand of the LORD" (24:14). David knew that God is good, and that he could trust God, even God's hand of discipline, more than he could trust anything or anyone else.

Have you reached the point in your life where you realize that God is just? That he can be trusted when he disciplines us? One of the hardest things for us to realize is that God is good and just and that he can be trusted. It is better to fall into the hands of a just and compassionate God than to fall into the hands of anyone else. We can trust God, even in God's severe mercies.

As Tim Challies [writes](#):

God's goodness means that everything God is and everything God does is worthy of approval, for he himself is the very standard of goodness. Those things that are good are those things that God deems good, that God deems fitting, that God deems appropriate ... To say, "Thy will be done," is to say, "Thy goodness be shown." It's to seek out evidence of God's goodness even in the hardest of his providences. It's to worship him, even with a broken heart.

When we see God as just, we'll learn to trust him over anyone or anything else, even when it's hard.

God is wrathful. God is sovereign. God is just. There's one more thing we learn in this passage.

Four: God is merciful.

You can't complete this story without seeing how it ended. At the end of this passage, we see God's incredible mercy. Listen to what happens next:

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 Araunah the Jebusite. (24:16)

"It is enough; now stay your hand." Don't make any mistake: God demonstrates his wrath against sin. But the implication in this passage is that the destruction seems to end before the three days are done. It was when the angel reached Jerusalem – the

city where God had promised to establish David's throne forever – that God stopped the destruction based on his mercy and his promises.

And there's an amazing detail in there. The place where the destruction stopped was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. He offers a sacrifice there.

What's so special about this place? 2 Chronicles 3:1 tells us that this is the place where Abraham was willing to offer his son to the Lord. This is the place where, a little later, Solomon's temple will be erected. And it's not far from the place where Jesus offered a perfect sacrifice. Jesus gave his life as a sacrifice for anyone who trusts in him. The mercy that God showed in this place reflects the mercy that God showed later at the cross, where God the Son took the wrath we deserved so that we could be shown mercy.

God is wrathful, sovereign, just, and merciful. Worship this God. Never take him for granted. And trust him. There's no God like him, and there's no God who, through Jesus, shows us mercy when we deserve his judgment.

Lord, thank you for revealing yourself in this passage. Help us not to make you in our image. Help us to see that you are wrathful, sovereign, just, and merciful. Thank you that in Jesus you said, "It is enough; now stay your hand." The judgment has been rendered; we are spared from your wrath. May we trust you and praise you. In Jesus' name, Amen.