

2 Samuel 24 - God rules over sin

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[0 : 00] So I'm going to read God's word for us, 2 Samuel chapter 24. I'm going to read the whole chapter to us. We are right at the end of our series in 2 Samuel. Let's listen to God's word.

Again, the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, go and take a census of Israel and Judah.

So the king said to Joab and the army commanders with him, go throughout the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba and enroll the fighting men so that I may know how many there are.

But Joab replied to the king, may the Lord your God multiply the troops 100 times over and may the eyes of my Lord the king see it. But why does my Lord the king want to do such a thing?

The king's word, however, overruled Joab and the army commanders, so they left the presence of the king to enroll the fighting men of Israel. After crossing the Jordan, they camped near Aror, south of the town in the gorge, and then went through Gad and on to Jazir.

[1 : 09] They went to Gilead and to the region of Tahim Hodshi and to Danjan and round towards the Sidon. When they went towards the fortress of Tyre and all the time of the Hivites and the Canaanites, finally they went on to Beersheba in the Negev of Judah.

After they'd gone through the entire land, they came back to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and 20 days. Joab reported the number of the fighting men to the king.

In Israel, there were 800,000 able-bodied men who could handle a sword, and in Judah, 500,000. David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the Lord, I have sinned greatly in what I have done.

Now, Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing. Before David got up the next morning, the word of the Lord had come to Gad the prophet, David's seer.

Go and tell David, this is what the Lord says. I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you. So Gad went to David and said to him, Shall there come on you three years of famine in your land?

[2 : 24] Or three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you? Or three days of plague in your land? Now then, think it over and decide how I should answer the one who sent me.

David said to Gad, I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great. But do not let me fall into human hands.

So the Lord sent a plague on Israel from that morning until the end of the time designated, and 70,000 of the people died. The people from Dan to Beersheba died.

When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the Lord relented concerning the disaster and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, Enough! Withdraw your hand.

The angel of the Lord was then at the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite. When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the Lord, I have sinned. I, the shepherd, have done wrong.

[3 : 24] But these are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall on me and my family. On that day, Gad went to David and said to him, Go up and build an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite.

So David went up as the Lord had commanded through Gad. When Arunah looked and saw the king and his officials coming towards him, he went out and bowed down before the king with his face to the ground. Arunah said, Why has my Lord the king come to his servant?

To buy your threshing floor, David answered, so that I can build an altar to the Lord so that the plague on the people may be stopped. Arunah said to David, Let my Lord the king take whatever he wishes and offer it up.

Here are oxen for the burnt offering and here are the threshing sledges and ox yokes for the woods. Your majesty, Arunah gives all of this to the king. Arunah also said to him, May the Lord your God accept you.

But the king replied to Arunah, No, I insist on paying for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing. So David brought the threshing floor and the oxen and paid 50 shekels of silver for them.

[4 : 34] David built an altar to the Lord there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then the Lord answered his prayer on behalf of the land and the plague on Israel was stopped.

Well, this is God's word for us this morning and we're going to look at it together. Let me pray very briefly and ask for the Lord's help. Father, we thank you for all that we have seen in the book of 2 Samuel and we pray even now that as we consider it again together that you might speak to us by your spirit through your word.

More than just that, we pray please that you might change us, move our hearts which are slow to trust, to trust you and love you. Pray for those who maybe have never really understood who you are or never trusted you.

May you open their eyes. May all of us, me as I preach and all of us as we listen, encounter you in your word, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. I wonder whether you've watched this TV show.

A few of us in our family have been watching it together. It's called The Majorca Files. Has anyone seen The Majorca Files? It's kind of like a whodunit type series. It's very kind of sedate. It's a British and a German detective both working in Majorca.

[5 : 51] They're kind of a bit hapless, so they don't really know what they're doing. And in the episode that we watched the other day, these two detectives had been asked by a senior police officer from Madrid to try and catch a conman.

So they did. These two hapless detectives managed to catch the conman and they chased him through the town. They cuffed him and put him in the back of the senior police officer from Madrid's car.

As they were driving away from it, really feeling quite satisfied with themselves, they realized and it dawned on them that the conman was not the person that they'd put in the back of the senior police officer's car, but the senior police officer himself.

So they were distressed. What are we going to do now? So they spun the car around and they chased after the senior police officer from Madrid. Then they were chasing him down and that involved speedboats and trying to chase him down, trying to shoot him, all that sort of stuff.

And it looked like he'd got away. And then what happened was the woman in charge of the Majorca police turned up with a whole load of police boats and arrested the senior police officer and the guy that they'd caught and cuffed.

[7 : 03] And it turns out that all along, this Majorca commander in charge of the police knew exactly what was happening and knew that her two hapless detectives were after the wrong person.

So they'd let it happen. Now, in a kind of bizarre sort of roundabout way, that is kind of what's happening in 2 Samuel. In 2 Samuel, you discover, don't you, that 70,000 Israelites died in a plague, right?

But it's not the natural disaster that you might have thought. You know, you might just think, oh, well, plagues happen, don't they? We know that. And this one happens. But it's not that because this plague comes as judgment against David's sin.

He chooses it, doesn't he? Instead of three years of famine or three months of military defeat, he says, I'll have three days of plague. And when you see that, you realize it's not just that either. Rather, that we find that behind all of that is God and his plan. God in sovereign power who is executing judgment on the people of Israel, even against David's sin that he had incited and the plague that followed.

[8 : 10] You might remember that we're at the conclusion of the book of 2 Samuel. So basically, these last few chapters, picking it up from chapter 21, these chapters are the conclusion, the summary, the epilogue at the end of the book of 2 Samuel.

And really, the writer is trying to round off his whole book and trying to tell you what's been going on. And it's not an ordinary history book. The book is not ending with the death of David.

We've now sort of leapt back into the story of David to an unidentified point in David's history. But the writer thinks if you understand this story and what's happening here, you will understand the

whole book.

This is the sort of summary. And what the writer wants us to understand is that everything that's been going on in the book, so Absalom's rebellion, Joab's murders, David's adultery, Amnon's rape, in all of that, even though God often was not mentioned directly, what the writer now wants you to understand is that all the time, God was there and God was in charge.

God was ruling and reigning. God has been behind it all, the good and the evil accomplishing his purposes. Let me try and demonstrate that to you. It's there in verse 1.

[9 : 21] Look down at verse 1. Let me read it to you again. Again, the anger of the Lord burned against Israel and he incited David against them, saying, go and take a census of Israel and Judah.

Just keep your eyes down on the verse and work through it backwards with me for a moment. Start at the end. King David is the speaker of the words in quotation marks. He's declaring that a census of Israel and Judah should be taken.

Specifically, it turns out, and we discovered this, it's a census of their fighting men. There are 1.3 million fighting men in Israel, 800,000 in Israel, 500,000 in Judah.

Now, the whole point of the chapter rests on the idea that you understand that David's instruction there to go and take a census is a sinful instruction. It was a wicked thing for him to do.

You see that, don't you, in Joab's response and the commanders in verses 3 and 4. They're objecting, aren't they? Don't do this, David. We don't want to do this. Don't do this. They try and persuade David out of it.

[10 : 25] But if you look down at verse 10, even David himself acknowledges that it was sinful. David was conscience-stricken after he counted the fighting men. And he said to the Lord, Lord, I have sinned greatly in what I have done.

Now, Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing. Now, what you need to understand is not that censuses themselves are immoral or wrong always.

The book of Exodus in chapter 30 permits the leaders of God's people to take censuses of the people of Israel. It gives them certain conditions under which they're to do it. The book of Numbers in your Bible is actually centered around two censuses of God's people.

So it's not always wrong to count the people, but it is wrong in certain circumstances and for certain reasons. And we're not told exactly why that is here, but still we're left in no doubt that David's intention in taking the census was a sinful one.

Perhaps it was pride. I want to see how big my army is. Let me work out how powerful I really am, maybe. We're just not quite sure what the intention was, but we are told that it is sinful.

[11 : 32] Perhaps he didn't collect the relevant tax that God had told him to in the book of Exodus. Now it was sinful and the people knew it. Now despite that and despite the fact that by verse 10 David is conscience stricken, still what you need to notice in the beginning of the chapter is that David is really determined to do this sinful thing.

Notice how verse 4 puts it. David's word prevails over the objections of Joab and his army commanders. Joab and the army commanders are saying, please David, don't do this, don't do this. But David's word prevails. David gets his way. Now if that's all there was in verse 1, if all you had in verse 1 was David saying, go and take a census of Israel and Judah and you knew it was sinful, then what you would have in some ways is something a bit similar to the rest of the things going on in 2 Samuel with the mess that's meant.

You know, Amnon desires Tamar and makes a mess. Absalom desires the nation, makes a mess. David desires a census, makes a mess.

But there's more to it than that because there's a twist here, isn't there? It turns out that the chief of police knew all along and knew exactly what was happening and was behind it all.

[12 : 49] Verse 1, above and behind, overruling everything that happens is God. The taking of the census, David's desire to take a census is verse 1, what?

Incited by God. In other words, God is leading David. He's leading him not against his will, yet David wants to do it as well.

He was willingly led, but still, chapter 24, verse 1, God incited David to want to take this census to punish the people of Israel.

Now, God is angry, isn't he? He is burning with anger, we find at the beginning of verse 1. He is heated up against the people of Israel for some sin or behavior that's not directly recorded for us in the chapter.

In other words, the story is not just the story of a sort of hapless David blundering into sin by accident, nor is it the story of innocent Israel getting caught up in the wickedness of David. Now, here's God in righteous anger, burning against the people of God, inciting David to take a sinful census so that judgment might fall on all the people.

[14:00] There's a parallel account in 1 Chronicles 21, verse 1. You can turn to it if you wanted to, but there, in 1 Chronicles 21, verse 1, you're told that actually it is Satan who incites David.

It says that Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take the census. Now, that's not because 1 Chronicles and 2 Samuel are contradicting one another.

Rather, it seems as though God's incitement of David is done through Satan. God is not the author of David's sin. He's not morally responsible for it.

Instead, while Satan desires to ruin the people and David desires to count the people in pride, still God stands behind it all in his ruling and reigning. God incites David against the people of Israel in punishment for their sin and 70,000 people die.

I don't know how well you guys remember Sermon Series. Okay, so I wonder if you might possibly remember when we were looking at 2 Samuel chapter, I think it was chapter 10, we talked about the rollercoaster of 2 Samuel.

[15:06] We said that we'd arrived at the top. You know how rollercoasters, they take you up, don't they, and up and up and up and you get to the very top and then they let you go and you fly down. Well, that's what 2 Samuel does.

And chapter 8, you achieve the high point of 2 Samuel, right, and you're sort of suspended there for a couple of chapters as we see David and all his greatness and then you fly down the rollercoaster, right, and it's just plummeting the depths of David's sin and the chaos that comes as a result.

But actually what you find by the time you get to chapter 24 is that that was not a very good illustration of what's going on because it's not a rollercoaster where there's no driver and where you're just going in an aimless loop.

Actually, it's more like a proper train and God himself is the driver and knows exactly where he's going and exactly what he's doing. The train is going somewhere. It's not going just the direction of David's wicked desires.

Instead, the direction is led by the Lord himself. Now, I think if you're following at this point, you should at least have some questions flying around your head.

[16:11] Not, what are we going to have for dinner, but some questions about the nature of God and what he's like. You should be thinking, how can God incite David into sin without being wicked himself?

How can I believe in a God who is involved like that in David's life and is still claiming to be good? Doesn't the Bible say that God can't tempt people to sin?

That every good and perfect gift comes from above? How is it now that in 2 Samuel 24 verse 1, I find God inciting the king of Israel to do something which we know was not a good thing to do?

Now, those are brilliant questions and they're not very easy questions to answer, but we must say that it must be true that God is good. The Bible is so very clear on that.

But whilst it doesn't undermine God's goodness, still, 2 Samuel 24 verse 1 must also be true. Which means that we we live, don't we, in a world which is ruled and reigned by a God who is good.

[17:16] A God who in his goodness and his moral perfection without ever undermining any of it, without becoming wicked himself, still, in uncompromising goodness, he rules and reigns and sovereignly rules even over the sinful intentions of wicked people's hearts in order to accomplish his purposes.

I know it's so easy for me to say that and it's easy for me to look at you and think, I don't know whether you've got that. But let me say it again because it's incredible.

God in moral perfection rules and reigns over our world in such a way that even the sinful intentions of the hearts of people who rebel against him are still in his hands.

Still in his hands. He can still do his purposes and his plans. So at the end of the book which has catalogued the disasters of the sinfulness of men and women, mostly men to be fair, but men and women, here at the end of the book you find that God has not lost the plot, he's not left the stage, he's not given up, rather God has been driving it all along, accomplishing his purposes.

And let me show you that in two specific areas. That God is sovereign over our world and the intentions of human hearts in judgment and in salvation. So let's start with in judgment.

[18 : 38] This is where verse one starts. God rules over sin in judgment. God is angry, isn't he, with the people of Israel. We're not told why. There are plenty of possibilities as you read the book of 2 Samuel.

Sort of depends on when you think these events happened. But the point is that God's desire to judge Israel leads him to incite David, using David's desire to sinfully count the army against the people so that they're judged.

I think as we watch the things happening in our world, it's common for us to feel there's a sort of sense of hopelessness, isn't there, in our world? Oh, there's never any justice. Evil people always seem to be able to get away with it.

Wicked people seem untouchable. Good people seem so inconsistent. Wickedness seems spiraling out of control. But in 2 Samuel 24, you're introduced to this idea that no, God is in charge of it.

And he is able to bring sin back on itself. He's able to sort of pile up wickedness in judgment on sin itself. Not necessarily always in a kind of instant karma kind of way that if you rob a bank, you'll get knocked over by a bus as you try and run away.

[19 : 47] But rather that in our world that God has made, there is a connection between sin and more sin in God's righteousness in the way that he has hardwired our world.

Now think about it. If you're a person who is sinfully angry with people all the time, you can expect to experience sinful anger coming back at you, can't you? Because that's the way that God has made the world.

Sin grows sin in judgment at sin. If you're full of sinful self-interest, you are insecurely thinking about yourself all the time, you can expect to experience a sort of shallowness in your relationships or a sinful dismissiveness of others in return because that's the way the world works.

Galatians 6 talks about it in the context of withholding support from those who teach the scriptures and it says, do not be deceived. God is not mocked for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

All of it which make us sit up and think, you know, wow, God, this is how you've wired the world. 1 Corinthians 11 talks about people in the church dying because of the way they treated one another in the Lord's Supper.

[20 : 59] Now, we might not be able to always draw the lines super clearly and I don't think we're supposed to. I think the Bible says that innocent people suffer innocently as well, but actually we live in a world that has been handed over by God to the sinful desires of people, not in an absence of his control, but in his judgments.

And so here in 2 Samuel 24, sinful Israel have a sinning king because God is judging them.

Interestingly, the New Testament talks about it even more than just a sort of sowing and reaping.

In Romans chapter 1, Paul says that you can see in our world today, you can see that God is angry with our world. You can see that the word it uses is wrath.

You can see God's wrath in the world. God's wrath is revealed against the sinfulness and wickedness of our world. Where might you expect to see God's wrath revealed? Well, if you look at Romans chapter 1, you see it in the wickedness of the world.

So three times in Romans 1, you get this repeated, the idea that God gives people over to their sinful desires. That's what he is doing in judgment to their sinful desires, handing them over to do what they want.

[22 : 13] So much so that the anger or wrath of God is seen in the sin that it leads to in the world. So Romans chapter 1, verse 28, says this. It's on the slide behind you, but you might want to turn to it because it's so important.

It's page 1,129. 1,129. Romans chapter 1. Romans chapter 1, verse 28. Paul writes this.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice.

They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful. They invent ways of doing evil. They disobey their parents. They have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things, but also approve of those who practice them. It's shocking, isn't it?

[23 : 37] Why is our world so full of envy? Why is it that people in our world gossip? Why is it that children are disobedient to their parents? Why is it that people are heartless and ruthless? What is it that leads people to such terrible actions?

Well, Romans chapter 1 is because God in his judgment has handed them over to their evil desires in judgment on their evil desires. Now, understanding this, that God judges wickedness with more wickedness should bring at least two responses in us.

One, I think, is that it should bring a sense of consolation. This idea that God is sovereign over the wickedness of our world brings great consolation because you know that there is nothing in our world that is outside of God's control.

the spiraling wickedness of our world, the spiraling wickedness which you may have felt personally, is not outside of God's control. It's not a sign of his absence.

Actually, it's a sign of his presence and his involvement. You're not to assume just that because things go disastrously wrong, that must mean that God's not there or that he's forgotten.

[24 : 50] Nor are we to ever imagine that people get away with sin. No, God sees it all and is navigating this world in such a way that we see the consequences of sin in a world that was made good but ruined by our rebellion.

That doesn't always mean, does it, that it's proportional. We're not to assume that it was the 70,000 worst people in Israel who died in the plague. David, whose sin led to this, remained alive.

There is a final judgment yet to come for sin when all of this will be finally resolved and yet still sin breeds sin under the judgment of God in his world and no one escapes.

The second response though, it should mean that we realize that the big problem in our world is that God burns with anger at the sin and wickedness in our world.

God is not just, I think sometimes we imagine that God might be concerned with the injustices that I'm concerned with but not others. But actually, the message of the Bible is that God is concerned with all injustice and all wickedness including mine, including yours.

[26 : 00] So that the moral God who has left his fingerprints all over you and me has shown us so that just in the way that we get outraged by injustice and wickedness, so God is outraged at all injustice and all wickedness in the world including mine and including yours.

So that my big need, your big need is not so much for comfort, not so much for a good night's rest, not so much for a refreshing holiday in the Caribbean. My great need, your great need in this world of spiraling wickedness is what?

Forgiveness, reconciliation with God, mercy, grace, a sacrifice for sin. That's what I really need because I live in a world of spiraling wickedness under the judgment of a just God who sees it all and knows it all.

I think we can be even more clear on it than just that, though. The point here is that David in 2 Samuel 24 gets to pursue his desires.

You see that? Verse 4, chapter 24, it is the king's word that overrules Joab and the army commanders. David is getting what he wants. You know, if you were David's counselor in 2 Samuel 24 in a kind of modern day speak, you'd sit down with David and you'd say, listen David, you do you.

[27 : 25] You be who you want to be. You are the only person who can do you, so you do it. You do what you want to do, David. Brilliant, says David. I want to count the people. Well, go ahead.

Count the people. But actually, it is in the very process of him doing what he wants to do that he faces the judgment of God for his sin.

We assume, don't we, that getting what we want, doing what we want, is a sign of success and blessing. But in 2 Samuel 24, getting what you want, doing what he wants, is a sign of God's judgment.

Have you considered that perhaps getting what you want might not be the road to glory, but might be the road to hell? But if what you're living for is simply the desires of your own heart, and you're getting them, have you considered that that might not be the blessing that you assume it is?

Our lives were given to us not to live for our own desires, but to live for God's glory. And if you're living simply for yourself, and you're being successful in it, it might not be a sign of God's blessing, it might just be that you're getting the judgment that God wants you to get.

[28 : 44] That's the challenge of 2 Samuel 24. David does exactly what he wants to do, but he does so under the hand of God's judgment. Secondly though, God's power over sin not only means judgment, it also means salvation.

God rules over sin in salvation. This I think is perhaps easier to miss in the passage, but this is where it's leading to. God's rule over David's sin in judgment on the sin of the people steers all

these events.

You see all of the events of 2 Samuel 24 arrive at a particular location, and it might not seem much to you, it's the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite. That's where you end up.

In fact, when you read the story aloud, you notice that Arunah's name gets mentioned an uncomfortably large amount of times in these end verses. The NIV, just to make it slightly easier to read, has missed out a few of them just because it's so awkward.

It's a strange sort of emphasis. Arunah, Arunah, Arunah, Arunah, Arunah. Do you know where you are? You're at the threshing floor of Arunah, Arunah the Jebusite. Do you know where you are? You're at the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite.

[29 : 46] Why that emphasis? Well, actually, I think that would have meant something more to the people of Israel when they're reading it, because this turns out to be the site of the temple that gets built.

The point of this is that David ends up there not with a sinful desire to count the people, but with a desire to pay for the sin of the people, doesn't he? He calls them sheep in verse 17, and he asks that he as the shepherd might stand in their place.

Please judge me, says David, as shepherd, may I stand in the place of the sheep and face punishment instead. And Gad steps in and says, no, build an altar here.

Again, just think about God's involvement. David is following God's lead as he's instructed by Gad, and he builds the altar, which he pays for himself, and it leads not just to the salvation of David and the ending of the plague, but actually it becomes this great sign of atonement for years and generations to come as the temple is built there, right up until the age of the New Testament.

So here, God sovereignly rules over David's sin, not just to lead David and the people to judgment, but actually to lead and steer the people to salvation as well.

[31 : 05] And not just for the sin of counting the people, but in the ministry of the temple for generations and generations to come. This is the scene of acted forgiveness for generations. Now, of course, what we're going to find, which we've been finding over and over again in 2 Samuel, is that David is a picture for us of Jesus.

Now, you know, don't you, that he's not a perfect picture. Jesus is not proud. He has no sinful desire to incite. In fact, in 2 Samuel 24, for much of it, David is the opposite of Jesus, isn't he?

You see this, don't you? David's sin leads to judgment on his people, right? That's the opposite of Jesus. Jesus' actions of righteousness lead to life and salvation for his people.

David is the opposite in much of this. But you see, don't you, the echo of Jesus in verse 17, where David recognizes that he, as a king, wants to be representative for his people, that his death might mean their salvation.

Pointing forward to Jesus. And here at the end, the parallels are so clear, aren't they? That the true temple of God is the Lord Jesus Christ. Standing in the place of Arunah's threshing floor is the cross of Jesus Christ.

[32 : 19] As the great shepherd of the sheep stands in the place of the sheep, the true sacrifice for sin, not on an altar, but the cross. And the parallels are even clearer than that only. Think about what happens at the cross.

We were thinking about this with the kids. The cross, remember, is the desire of sinful men and women. Men and women who have an inexplicable hatred for Jesus. And they yell for Jesus to be killed, don't they?

Despite the fact they know Jesus has done no wrong. Hard to think of a more wicked act than shouting for the death of the Son of God in human flesh. That's exactly what the crowds do, don't they?

You know, kill this man. Oh, he's had compassion on the crowds all of his ministry, yet they're shouting, kill him, kill him. He healed my mum from a disease.

Kill him anyway. I saw him raised to death. Kill him anyway. He fed \$5,000. Crucify him. Crucify him. Now, if you want to know that our sin problem is its heart, a hatred of God, then look no further than the cross.

[33 : 22] But still, in all of that, in God's sovereign power over the sinfulness of humanity, what is God doing? He is saving his people.

He has a plan to save. So much so that you could say God incites their wicked cries so that King Jesus would arrive at the cross and provide the means for our forgiveness in his death on our

