

## The Lord's Great Mercy

2 Samuel 24

Key Verse: 24:14

*"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 the hands of men.'"*

I don't know if any of you remember this or not but back in the 70's there was a movie called "Death Wish." It starred Charles Bronson an action hero of the time. It was about a CPA who becomes a vigilante after his wife was murdered and his daughter assaulted by muggers. After the incident a client gives him a gun. And it's not long after this, while he is walking on the streets of New York, that he is attacked by muggers. He defends himself with the gun and shoots both of the muggers. Soon he is walking the streets looking for trouble makers. The movie was a success going on to make 4 sequels. With the rising crime rate in America, people loved Charles Bronson's no mercy approach to criminals. The movie's tag line was, "Death Wish – Vigilante, city style – judge, jury and executioner." While we may like the "no mercy" approach to others, especially criminals, we don't like that approach towards us. Through today's passage, let's think about the Lord's great mercy.

It's impossible to determine the date of when this event takes place from this passage alone, but the parallel version in 1 Chronicles 21 places it just before David gives instructions to his son Solomon for building the temple. (1Ch 21:28-22:19) It must have come late in David's reign, and may have been part of his plan in handing over reign to Solomon.

Take a look at verse 1. "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.'" The Bible doesn't tell us why the Lord was angry with Israel at this point, but generally scholars believe that "again" refers back to 2 Samuel 21:1 when Israel was punished with a famine for three years because of the people's widespread support in the rebellions of Absalom and Sheba. In this verse it says that God was angry and so He incited David, however 1 Chronicles 21:1 says, "Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel," so who did it? It appears that the Bible contradicts itself with these two passages, but when you understand what's going on you'll find that there is no contradiction. The Lord, being angry with his people, removed his hands of protection and allowed Satan to prompt David. As we know from Job 1, Satan is roaming around the world looking for opportunities to pounce upon people and entice them to sin. (Gen 4:7) God is all powerful and nothing can happen unless He allows it. And in this case, as it was in the case with Job, God decided to remove his hands of protection. This was also the case when God allowed an evil spirit to torment Saul. (1 Sam 16:14) Let's be clear, the Lord Himself didn't incite David to do evil, for "God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone," (Jam 1:13) however, God permits sin, but he never causes it. David, in response to God's anger, orders Joab and the army commanders to, "Go throughout the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba and enroll the fighting men, so that I may know how many there are." (v2)

"But Joab replied to the king, 'May the LORD your God multiply the troops a hundred 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?'" (v3) Now, here's a funny thing, Joab of all people, understands the situation and he pushes back against David resisting taking the census. At first I thought that he just didn't want to do all that work having to walk around for nine months. But actually Joab knows what David is asking him to do is actually a sin against God and so he doesn't want to do it.

Is counting the people a sin? In reality, the act of counting the people was not in itself sinful. Actually Moses did it with the authority of God, (Ex 30:12) so that can't be it. Then, what's the problem? The reason David wants to take the census is not clear, however the fact that he only wants to count the military men, (v2, 9) and there doesn't seem to be a threat from their enemies, suggests that David was

interested in finding out his military strength. And here lays the sin –David must have wanted to boast in his human strength. And Joab confirms this in his rebuttal saying, that God could multiply their troops as much as necessary, so David didn't have to assess his strength. What we find here is David's wrong response to God's anger. When David realized that God was angry, he should have been humble and sought God to find out what was wrong but instead he orders a census to be taken with a prideful motive. There is a saying that people like to use to justify their actions, "the devil made me do it," but that isn't true. While we may be tempted, we are still responsible for our actions. Even though Joab and all the army commanders objected, David overruled them and so they headed out to enroll the fighting men. (v4)

So Joab heads east across the Jordan River and then heads north going around the country in a counter clockwise motion. Nine months later he returns with a count of 1.3M fighting men. Take a look at verse 10. "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, O LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing.'" When it was all done, David was overwhelmed with guilt because of the census and he realized that he was replacing his trust in God with statistics. David had been blind to his sin until after he did it. Has this ever happened to you? When something looks good in the beginning but afterward, you realize that it was a sin?

"Before David got up the next morning, the word of the LORD had come to Gad the prophet, David's seer: <sup>12</sup> '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.'" (v11-12) Imagine what it must have been like for Gad to have to go and tell David this news. I think that it is very difficult to deliver tell others that they have sinned. Take a look at verse 13. "So Gad went to David and said to him, 'Shall there come upon you three years of famine in your land? 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.'" The three different options that God presents to David were all included in the curses that Moses said would come on God's people when they failed to follow their covenant obligations. (Dt 28:15-25) David had to choose from 3 years, 3 months, or 3 days of God's wrath. God told David to think it over and get back to him. This reminds me of my young days when I did something wrong and my father would punish me. Sometimes he would give me a choice, would you rather be grounded for a month, or get whipped with a rubber hose? Grounding would take a long time and every day there was the pressure of having to think about what I did. On the other hand, the whipping would be short, but oh so painful. That's not an easy choice. And David's response was like, "Those are terrible choices."

Let's read verse 14. "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 the hands of men.'" David's response is probably the best response that he could have given. David would rather fall into the hand of God because he has experienced God's mercy and he knows that the mercy of God is much better than that of men. For men have the potential to be really cruel. "So the LORD sent a plague on Israel from that morning until the end of the time designated, and seventy thousand of the people from Dan to Beersheba died. <sup>16</sup> When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the LORD was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, 'Enough! Withdraw your hand.'" (v16-17) Given that fact that a plague was sent, David must have picked the last choice. Some think David's reasons for choosing the plague was to open himself up for God's punishment. Since he was king, a famine may never have reached him as is the case in North Korea now. And since his army vowed to protect him and wouldn't let him go into battle, he would have been shielded. But there would be no way for David to protect himself from a plague. He would be at the mercy of God.

In those 3 plague filled days, 70K people died. God showed how easily it is to have our foundations shaken. If we put our hope in something in the world, such as military strength, without putting our hope in God, then there is a danger for what we hope in to disappear. It is foolish to trust in the world and not

God. What David had put his hope in, God showed just how quickly He could take it away. The rapid destruction by the plague show how easily God can bring down the proudest of sinners and how much we owe to God for his divine patience. Even with all this destruction, God revealed how merciful he is because just as he was about to wipe out Jerusalem, he backed off. David was wise to depend upon the mercy of God.

When David sees the destruction and how the people were suffering, his heart was struck with pain because he knew that it was on account of him. They were not innocent because God was angry with them in the first place (because of their rebellion against David) but David felt guilty because it he was the catalyst. Verse 17, “When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the LORD, “I am the one who has sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall upon me and my family.” This verse reminded me of Moses who acted in the same way when God wanted to destroy the stiff necked Israelites. From this we can see David’s shepherd’s heart and love for his people. He wanted to bear the punishment for his people. A shepherd heart grieves for suffering people, they don’t feel fortunate that the plague didn’t reach them. The people had paid the price for David’s sin and David grieved over it. This is very different than today’s politicians who sell people out for their own personal gain. David was willing to put himself and his family in the line of fire in order to protect his people. I don’t know about you but that is a leader that I can respect and follow.

“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 Araunah the Jebusite.”<sup>19</sup> So David went up, as the LORD had commanded through Gad.” (v18-19) Here is another way that we can see the mercy of God. After David had sinned, a gap formed in their relationship. It was not easy to come together because that is the nature of sin, it breaks relationships. But God humbles himself and sends his prophet Gad to David and tells David the way to restore their relationship, how to come back to God. Gad shows David how to approach God. We have to approach God in the way that God wants, not our own way. Sometimes people get mad because they can’t come to God in the way they want, but they don’t have a problem when that applies to a judge in a courtroom. We have different standards applying to God. Gad tells David that the way to come back to God is to build an altar and give an offering to God. David humbly accepts. Another way that we can see God’s mercy is how He worked through this whole event. God allowed the sin to happen, but He found a way to bring David back. And through the process David grew as a shepherd for his people. This is God’s mercy for sinners – that he devises ways to make them righteous. Though sometimes it’s painful, God’s way is the best and most effective way.

So David finds Araunah and tells him that he wants to buy his threshing floor. But Araunah offers to give it to David and he would even throw in some oxen as well. But will have none of it, he wants to pay full price for it. Take a look at verse 24. “But the king replied to Araunah, “No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.” So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen and paid fifty shekels of silver for them.” David understood the meaning of a sacrifice. When we offer a sacrifice to God, it means that we are giving up something to God. In a sense, our offerings should hurt a little, otherwise there is no sacrifice. This reminds me of the widow’s offering in Luke 2. “As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury.”<sup>2</sup> He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins.<sup>3</sup> “I tell you the truth,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others.”<sup>4</sup> All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” (Lk 2:1-3) It is not the amount that we give to God, but what attitude that we give it with. Even though the widow only gave two pennies, it was more valuable to Jesus because it was all the woman had to live on. It was a real sacrifice for her. When we think about this, we have to examine our own hearts. How do we offer to God? Do we offer out of our wealth giving God our leftovers, or are you sincerely sacrificing giving to God out of your poverty? When we give out of our poverty, it displays our faith because we have to trust in the Lord that He will meet our needs. And this

isn't speaking only on monetary terms, only about money, but this includes all things such as our time, our abilities, and our hearts. What does your offering to God look like?

When David bought the threshing floor from Araunah, "he build an altar to the LORD there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then the LORD answered prayer in behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped." (24b-25) It is amazing, when we sincerely repent and offer our sacrifices to the Lord, he hears our prayers. And what's even more amazing is that this place where David repents, is the place where the Temple of the Lord will be built. Often, the things we repent of God uses for His glory. Do you know what happened on the spot where David built the altar? This was the spot where God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac and provided a ram for the sacrifice. And what is even more amazing, many years later God would destroy the Temple and provide the sacrifice above all other sacrifices that would atone for the sin of all mankind through sacrificing His one and only Son Jesus to pay the price for our sin.

Our God is truly a merciful God who in the spirit of a true shepherd offered himself as a sacrifice for us. 1 Peter 1:3-4 tells us, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,"<sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you." We can depend upon the mercy of God because He is always faithful.

Doing a word study on "mercy" brings back 124 references from the Bible. There are a flood of verses in Psalms that cry out for God's mercy. And remember Job he said, "Though I were innocent, I could not answer him; I could only plead with my Judge for mercy." (Job 9:15) And wonderfully the Psalmist confesses, "The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer." (Ps 6:9) We need the mercy of God. Without it, his anger would destroy us. I have read comments on the web from various articles where people have commented that if God was like that, then they do not want to be around Him. They act as if they are more powerful than God. As if they can tell God what to do. What they fail to realize is that God is Almighty, all powerful, and they need the mercy of God otherwise they will be his enemy. But through his great mercy, he sent his only son to restore our relationship as we need to do is believe in him and accept it. May we all fall into the merciful hands of our God.