

How Shall I Make Atonement?
2 Samuel 21:1-14, 24
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Introduction

The World Series just ended and I'm always reminded when I watch baseball about how much people care about the numbers: how many home runs players hit, how many RBIs they rack up, what the pitchers' ERAs are, the on base percentages... all of the stats that quantify how good each player is. Every sport makes a big deal about numbers; even as we watch our daughters play volleyball, we get excited about how many kills, aces, and digs they get. And numbers are a big deal in a lot of other areas of life. In politics, constant polling data tells candidates whether they might win a race, and what the will of the voters is. To understand how the economy is doing, we are told the consumer index numbers, the GDP (gross domestic product), the DPI (disposable personal income), inflation rates, unemployment rates, and others like it. Entertainment success is judged by numbers, as the Barbie movie made \$1.4 billion worldwide and Taylor Swift's tour will end up making like \$4 or \$5 billion dollars. Even churches are obsessed with numbers, as pastors and church leaders measure themselves against others by the size of their church, the number of services, the number of baptisms, numbers of churches planted, and size or the budget.

But you know who's not too terribly concerned with numbers? The Creator of the Universe. At least not in the same way that we are. He uses some weird math. To Him, a day is like a thousand years. He would leave ninety-nine to chase after one. He is more impressed with a widow who gives her pennies in the offering plate than the rich man who gives tens of thousands. Our Scripture passage today shows us a time when King David was obsessed with numbers, and God was provoked to anger because of it. We'll actually have two stories that involve Israel offending God, and in both stories, the deaths of Israelites will end the punishments and consequences that have been enacted. These stories are hard to hear and hard to process. They involve suffering, grief, and what feels like the unjustified taking of life. But they are historical, theological, and pedagogical, meaning we need to read them to be taught and to understand on a deep level. They will point to something greater, the theological concept that we need to find peace with God by finding a way to cover over our own offenses.

Let's get to the text. The first fourteen verses of chapter 21 take us

I. From Famine to Favor (21:1-14)

¹ Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year. And David sought the face of the Lord. And the Lord said, "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death." ² So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel but of the remnant of the Amorites. Although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah. ³ And David said to the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? And how shall I make atonement, that you may bless the heritage of the Lord?" ⁴ The Gibeonites said to him, "It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house; neither is it for us to put any man to death in Israel." And he said, "What do you say that I shall do for you?" ⁵ They said to the king, "The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, ⁶ let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them before the Lord at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord." And the king said, "I will give them." ⁷ But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul's son Jonathan, because of the oath of the Lord that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son

of Saul. ⁸ The king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; ⁹ and he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the mountain before the Lord, and the seven of them perished together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest. ¹⁰ Then Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell upon them from the heavens. And she did not allow the birds of the air to come upon them by day, or the beasts of the field by night. ¹¹ When David was told what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done, ¹² David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the men of Jabesh-gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa. ¹³ And he brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan; and they gathered the bones of those who were hanged. ¹⁴ And they buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of Kish his father. And they did all that the king commanded. And after that God responded to the plea for the land.

When famine or drought struck Israel, there was usually a reason and a warning.

Deuteronomy 28:20, 24 – *“The Lord will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken Me... The Lord will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed.”*

God sent famine on his people as a result of their covenant-breaking and evil deeds. Here, David and his people endured three years of famine before David finally sought the Lord to find out why. God was displeased that the Gibeonites still had a legitimate grudge against Saul for massacring their people many years earlier. Joshua 9 records the covenant that Israel had made with the Gibeonites, and Saul had broken that covenant. Do you remember what happened when a covenant was enacted? Animals were torn in two and then the two parties walked between the torn pieces because it was a visual picture of what would happen if one party broke the covenant – they were agreeing to be torn as well. So Saul’s breaking the covenant carried with it a heavy punishment, and since he was no longer around to be killed, they would require justice from his descendants.

David asked the Gibeonites how he could make things right and they said that it could not be settled with money; it required a blood-debt, specifically seven of Saul’s descendants to be hanged. Numbers 35:33 says that *“no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one shed for it.”* Israel had to learn by this painful object lesson that their covenants with foreign nations, sworn to in the name of Yahweh, had to be observed at all costs. Now, ordinarily, children were not put to death for their father’s sins, “but this was no ordinary case. Saul represented Israel, and he had violated a national covenant... the nation, thus, was collectively responsible for the sin. Instead of the nation’s dying, legitimate representatives of Saul and the nation – Saul’s grandsons – died.”¹

Remember that David’s children were dying as part of the fallout and judgment of his sin with Bathsheba, so this is not a foreign concept, even if Saul’s grandsons seem more innocent. David handed over the seven men and the Gibeonites did exactly what they said they would. Notice in verse 7 that David would not break his own covenant with Jonathan by allowing Mephibosheth to be executed. The aftermath of this execution in verses 10-14 are a stark contrast to the violence and horror of what has just happened. Rizpah, one of the mothers, shows compassion and dignity

¹ Ligonier’s TableTalk magazine, July 2019 issue, p. 42.

by camping out near the bodies and keeping the birds from desecrating them further, and then David buried their bones along with Saul's and Jonathan's. And ultimately, the atonement sacrifice worked, as God ended the famine.

If you dislike that passage and are outraged that people had to die to turn away the judgment of God in that story, you definitely won't like this next one!

II. The Senseless Census (24:1-15)

¹ Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah." ² So the king said to Joab, the commander of the army, who was with him, "Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people." ³ But Joab said to the king, "May the Lord your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see it, but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?" ⁴ But the king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to number the people of Israel. ⁵ They crossed the Jordan and began from Aroer, and from the city that is in the middle of the valley, toward Gad and on to Jazer. ⁶ Then they came to Gilead, and to Kadesh in the land of the Hittites; and they came to Dan, and from Dan they went around to Sidon, ⁷ and came to the fortress of Tyre and to all the cities of the Hivites and Canaanites; and they went out to the Negeb of Judah at Beersheba. ⁸ So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. ⁹ And Joab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to the king: in Israel there were 800,000 valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were 500,000. ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ And when David arose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, ¹² "Go and say to David, 'Thus says the Lord, Three things I offer you. Choose one of them, that I may do it to you.'" ¹³ So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, "Shall three 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 decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me." ¹⁴ Then David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man." 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.

OK, let's just lay out the biggest difficulty in this section up front: God told David to number the people and then He got angry that David did it, and 70,000 people ended up dying from the punishment. What are we to make of this passage? To complicate things, in the middle of it all, David felt remorse, repented, and pleaded with the Lord to take away his sin. Apparently, he didn't use the old standby excuse: "But you made me do it!" But the text kind of reads like He did.

The first thing to try to understand is why God would instruct David to number the people if He was going to be angry later about a census being taken. To begin with, the first verse tells us that the Lord's anger was already kindled against Israel, but it doesn't say why; though we know that it was always disobedience of some kind. The next thing to understand is that the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 21:1 tells us that someone else instigated this census: "*Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.*" Rather than saying, "Aha, now we see how the Bible is full of errors and contradictions," I think we can see that one writer is talking about God being the first cause of all things and allowing sin, while the second writer is explaining the second causes: Satan and David enacting sin. As one commentary explained: "On the one hand, Satan who is the opponent of God and His people, is morally culpable for tempting and "inciting" David into this sin.

Both tempter and the one who gives into the temptation (David) are therefore morally culpable and guilty for their sinful action. But in the wisdom and providence of God's sovereign decree, he can be said to be behind all of this using it for his good purposes."²

The next thing we try to understand is why this census was so abominable to God. The text doesn't explain why, but I think that a key to the whole passage is what Joab asked David back in verse 3: "*why does... the king delight in this thing?*" Keep in mind that the only numbers reported from the census were the number of fighting men, not the population at large. David delighting to number his available soldiers was rooted in pride – that he delighted in his big army rather than in his big God. He found his security in the size of his army, and it hinted that he was planning on picking some new battles that he knew he could win.³ David eventually characterized his action as "behaving foolishly." That seems to be the problem with the census, but we don't know for sure. Let's turn this around on ourselves a little bit: Dale Davis asks: "Do we perhaps assume that God must always explain Himself and justify His ways? If we cannot be content to accept the mystery of this text we may be revealing ourselves. If we are upset over a text that tells us that Yahweh is angry but does not tell us why, are we not saying that we really don't trust him to be just?... Are we angry because God is not perfectly transparent? Can we live – and worship – with mystery?"⁴

God gave David three choices: 3 years of famine, 3 months of running from enemies, or 3 days of pestilence/plague. David said basically: anything but the second choice of running from enemies. "*Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man.*" Even anticipating God's wrath and punishment, David was sure of God's mercy.

The final ten verses of the entire book of 2 Samuel recount

III. The Plea That Stopped the Plague (24:16-25)

¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷Then David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel who was striking the people, and said, "Behold, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father's house." ¹⁸And Gad came that day to David and said to him, "Go up, raise an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." ¹⁹So David went up at Gad's word, as the Lord commanded. ²⁰And when Araunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. And Araunah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground. ²¹And Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" David said, "To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the Lord, that the plague may be averted from the people." ²²Then Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him. Here are the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. ²³All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king." And Araunah said to the king, "May the Lord your God accept you." ²⁴But the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. ²⁵And David built there an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the Lord responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.

² S.A. Fix & J. Robert Vannoy, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/2-samuel/#section-14>:

³ Heath Thomas & J.D. Greear, *Exalting Jesus in 1 and 2 Samuel* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), p. 259-60.

⁴ Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (England: Christian Focus, 2013), p. 318.

As God was ending His punishment of Israel, He simultaneously sent word to David to raise an altar, which meant sacrificing oxen as burnt and peace offerings. Apparently, David couldn't just rent or borrow the threshing floor that he was directed to, he had to buy it. Does everyone know what a threshing floor is? It's where the farmers brought their harvest to separate the wheat and the chaff. Jesus uses the picture of God separating the wheat and chaff several times as an explanation of God's judgment, but I don't know if there is deep spiritual meaning to God choosing the threshing floor here; maybe there is. We know that the angel who was killing the Israelites was apparently hanging out near the place, so that's why David had to sacrifice there. So, after he bought the land and the animals, David's sacrificial offerings resulted in God ending the plague.

The text doesn't say this here, but we know that this threshing floor is very significant for two other reasons. 2 Chronicles 3:1 tells us that, "*Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to David his father, at the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.*" If you're wondering why the book of 2 Samuel ends with this seemingly strange story of David buying a threshing floor, it's because it's the site where Solomon would build the temple; it's pointing ahead to that glorious project. But that's not all, Mount Moriah also happens to be the very spot where Abraham had offered his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice a thousand years earlier. At the same site where Abraham once held a knife over his son, David sees the angel of the Lord with a sword ready to plunge into Jerusalem. In both cases death is averted by sacrifice - the ram died in Isaac's place, just as the animals that David sacrificed here stopped the plague. And the temple would soon be established there as the place where Israel was perpetually reminded that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.

Conclusion

I need to ask you a question that may feel disconnected to this text, but we'll work our way back: How do you feel about the events surrounding Noah's Ark? I remember a couple friend of ours down in Florida had their first house, and in the main living room, the wife had decorated a wall with all of her Noah's Ark memorabilia. So there were all these pictures of the cute animals and the scenes of them walking up the ramp to get into the ark; there were books, lamps, and figurines. For some reason, I was feeling a bit snarky, but thankfully didn't say anything while we were there; but when we drove away, I turned to Kath and said something like, "It must be fun decorating your house with the story of the slaughter of basically the entire world." Seriously, when God saved Noah and his family, and two of every animal (with seven pairs of every kind of clean animal), He then proceeded to flood the entire earth so that every single living being not on the ark died. God wiped everyone out because of the severe wickedness that covered the earth, and basically reset humanity through Noah's family. It's not a cute story no matter what the artwork and children's Bibles depict; it's a severe story that reminds us that God has the right to judge sin as severely as He chooses. Now afterwards, God placed the rainbow in the sky to be a sign that He would never wipe out the world in a flood again. He did not say that He was done punishing sin, just that He would not flood the world. So, if you're angry or offended by God's ending 70,000 Israelite lives in 2 Samuel, you've got a much bigger issue with Him back in Genesis 7.

Let me work a different angle (courtesy of James Montgomery Boice): The astronomer Claudius Ptolemy, who lived shortly after the New Testament was finished being written, said that the earth is the center of the universe, with the stars and planets revolving around it. Astronomers at the time were able to accomplish certain things: they could predict sunrise, sunset, new moons, and chart planets. But it was not always accurate and as hard as the astronomers worked with calculations and data, there was a fundamental flaw at the heart of their system. This model of the universe dominated scientific thought until Copernicus came along fourteen hundred years later

and showed that the sun was the center of the universe around which everything else revolved. Once astronomers knew for certain what the center of the universe was, they could make their observations and calculations accurately. We have a similar problem in our lives and thoughts: we naturally think that human beings are the center of the universe, the ones that all of life should revolve around. But that system is fatally flawed, and when we make our decisions and base our theology on that model, we will always be wrong. The only way to face life head on and make the right decisions and find the right answers is to realize that God is the center of all things.⁵

If we say that God is not just or good because He took away human life, what have we done? We have put ourselves at the center of the universe and the center of theology. If we cannot accept things in the Bible because they don't seem fair to us, what have we done? We've said that God has to serve us, we've made ourselves God. Listen, no one of us should take pleasure in human beings being punished or killed. If someone asks you if you think they are going to hell because they don't believe in Jesus, you can say, "Yes, but I find no joy in that, I'm torn up that you've chosen that." But we also don't explain away the judgment and harshness of the Bible so that it doesn't offend people who don't like a God who makes the rules and sovereignly governs the universe to the pleasure of His will. If we start with man's needs and wants, start with the wrong foundation; we must start with God, His glory, and His sovereignty. And your acceptance of the truth and righteousness of 2 Samuel 21 and 24 is a good start.

There's another noteworthy census in the Bible, one that happened roughly a thousand years after this one. When Caesar Augustus conducted a census of the Roman Empire, little did he know that hidden in a far corner of that empire was the greatest human life to ever exist. It was the greatest because not only was it a human life, but it was also a divine life. God and Man existed inside one person for the only time in human history, and He was just a number in Caesar's great spreadsheets when he counted his people. This God-Man, Jesus of Nazareth, grew up in obscurity, spending roughly the first thirty years of His life as a carpenter before forming a small group of disciples and ministering for three years around the territories of Israel. His life came to an end when the religious leaders falsely accused Him of treason, and Rome executed Him on a cross.

Despite what the shameful death looked like, it was actually the plan all along. Jesus had a mission to die in place of His people. Just as Saul's sin had broken the covenant with the Gibeonites and demanded a blood-debt, and just as the people's sin and David's sin had brought the wrath of God on His people, so Adam's original sin had brought sin and the curse of God on humanity. God gave His people the sacrificial system where an animal could be killed to atone for their sins, to turn away God's wrath as it did with David on the threshing floor. But that was only a temporary system because it had a flaw in it that Hebrews 10:4 explains: "*For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin.*" The penalty for our sin was human death, either ours or a sinless substitute. And this is exactly who we have in Jesus Christ, who fulfills all the justice that our sin demands by dying in our place. Jesus was torn in place of us, who should have been torn for the covenant that we broke.

→ Communion: He is the once for all sacrifice so that no longer must blood be shed for our atonement, but instead we are given a sign and seal of his sacrifice by means of a cup of celebratory wine and a nourishing morsel of bread in the Lord's supper.

Benediction - 2 Peter 3:18 - "*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*"

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 4:1015.