

A Heart Like David

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Well, I don't know about you, but sometimes King David kind of grinds my gears, if you know what that means. There are some times when I look at King David in the Old Testament, and I say, "Man! This is quite a good guy!" Right? Like, when you've got, you know, David versus Goliath, there's a lot of admirable stuff about him. But then, you kind of get other stories, like David and Bathsheba, or how he kills Bathsheba's husband. And we've also got how he treats his wife, Michal, and I'm kind of like, "Man! This guy's kind of despicable!" There's some things that I like about him; there are other things that I really *don't* like about him. And it really causes me just to pause and consider how on earth the bible could call David "a man after God's own heart."

So, continuing in our series that's considering troubling and kind of more obscure Old Testament stories, we're going to consider a story that examines David. And we're going to find out that David is rightfully called a man after God's own heart, even though he is a sinful man. Because, you see, *though* he's sinful, there is a character trait about him that makes him someone who's rightfully called God's king over Israel. Though he's a sinful man, David also repents. David is a repenting man. If you have your bibles, please turn to 2 Samuel 24. I don't know the page number, actually, but it's there! 2 Samuel 24. This is the last – oh, there it is, it's up there. Page 234 or 262.

This is the last chapter in the book of 1 and 2 Samuel. If you recall, 1 and 2 Samuel's actually just one big book. In our English versions, it's divided into two parts, but really it's just one continuous story, and Chapter 24 here is the conclusion to the whole book. And that is the strangest thing, because this conclusion isn't really how I would think a conclusion to a story like this should go. 1 and 2 Samuel was covering the rise of the kings in Israel, as well as basically covering the life of David. But our last story here, the story that's the conclusion to it all, is a time when David does a census over Israel. Not the way I'd usually end it. Probably would leave some readers confused. But what we get is David counting people in a census, and God almost killing everybody because of it. The end. It's like, "What?!" It kind of is a little bit confusing and it kind of makes you wonder, "What's the logic behind this?" Why would you end 1 and 2 Samuel with a story like this?

Well, actually, I think it's a very ingenious ending, and there's multiple reasons why. I think that it summarizes for us what made David who he was. If you notice this story, it's actually taken out of chronological order. The author of 1 and 2 Samuel has looked over David's life and has picked this story, taken it out of context, and put it right at the end of the story for us, being the fitting conclusion to his life. It summarizes things about him – about what kind of king he was, and also what kind of person he was. And it aptly illustrates a central feature of who he is and tells us *why* he is a man after God's own heart, because though he's sinful, he also repents. He's a man who sins, but who sees his sins for what they are, laments them, and turns to God for mercy and newness of life. And that's something that all of us can relate to. So it's a long story, and we can't go through it all in one go, so I'm just kind of going to walk through the narrative, and we'll see how it's a good conclusion, and how it actually fits relevant to our lives today.

So I'm starting in verse 1 of 2 Samuel 24, and I'm reading from the NIV.

Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah." 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." 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?" 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.

(NIV)

All right, so we'll stop right there. Already, this narrative has us ask some questions. Apparently, God is upset. He doesn't tell us the context of this event. This happened in David's life; we're not sure what happened, though. Apparently, God is upset and He's upset *again*. And, apparently, you know, Israel has a good habit of making God angry, if you know that... But by not telling us what's going on here, the author is intentionally focusing us on the troubling effects of God's anger on Israel. Because of God's anger, He incites King David to take a census over Israel. Now, apparently, the census idea is kind of scandalous. Joab is like, "Whoa, man. Why do you want me to go do a census?" And if you're like me, that's kind of a weird reaction. I mean, generally, I mean, censuses *can* be kind of annoying; you have some government people come into your house, and they start asking you a bunch of questions. You know: How many kids have you got? What's your religion? What's the religion of your pets? [congregation laughs] All these kind of questions that keep you wondering. It's like, okay, that's kind of annoying, but Joab's reaction seems a little bit, you know, more intense than that.

But I think Joab isn't upset because a census is annoying; he's upset because a census is evil. And, I mean, Joab, he ain't an anarchist, all right? He ain't saying, "Down with the government!" or, "Taxation is theft!" or anything. He's just telling us he's somehow upset that somehow a census is evil! And it's strange because, for any other nation, a census would be no big deal, right? We do censuses all the time, and I don't think that's evil. But Israel was not like every other nation; Israel had God as its true King. And Joab recognized that doing a census showed distrust toward God. Notice specifically what David is counting here. He is counting not just the general population of Israel; he's counting the soldiers. He wants to know how strong his army is, and how many soldiers he's got. And then we start to see, hmm, there's an element of the sinful aspect of David's life popping up again. It's apt that it's in the conclusion, as well, because throughout his life he shows this tendency to trust in himself rather than to trust in God.

See, it's a problem for the king of Israel to count his armies *because* the nation of Israel had a promise from God that He would protect and strengthen Israel Himself. In fact, the author of 1 and 2 Samuel has already told us this at the beginning of 1 Samuel. He's already told us that this is what God does. In 1 Samuel 2, the author records this prayer of Hannah. And it's not just recorded for fun; it actually reveals certain aspects and themes that the author outlines throughout the rest of the book. Here, this is what Hannah says here. She says in verse 8 of Chapter 2 of 1 Samuel:

***“For the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s;
on them he has set the world.
He will guard the feet of his faithful servants,
but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness.***

***“It is not by strength that one prevails;
those who oppose the Lord will be broken.
The Most High will thunder from heaven;
the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.***

***“He will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed.”***

(NIV)

God would give strength to Israel. God Himself had *promised* to do so. But yet, here we have in 2 Samuel 24 King David looking to his *own* armies for strength. One author has put it like this: David moves from relying on God to win battles to relying on access to military might. This is sinful because David is acting like a typical king rather than the king of God’s nation, Israel. And notice how David is referred to here. He’s not referred to as David, right? He’s actually just referred to as “the king.” It says, “The king said to Joab...” “The king said this...” “The king did that...” “The king’s word prevailed...” And that’s intentional. The author is pointing out to us that David *is* the king, and he is *acting* like a king, but he is acting like just any old king and *not* like the king God desires. And that’s a big no-no. Even Joab, the commander of the army, realizes that this is a serious miscalculation on David’s part. And if you know anything about Joab, he ain’t the most religious guy! Even *he* knew that it was not worth the risk, and yet, David did it anyway. Why?

Well, the text tells us why, and it kind of sounds a bit crazy. The text says that God incited him to do this. Now, I don’t know about you, but that sounds a little bit sketchy. I think about it, and it’s like, how could God incite David to do something that was evil? That surprises me. And it gets even more complicated than this. See, this isn’t the only time David’s census here is mentioned in the bible; there’s another place in the bible that it’s mentioned, and that’s in 1 Chronicles 21. And there, we read this:

Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.

(NIV)

It’s like, what?! Is it God that’s inciting David to take this census, or is it Satan that’s inciting David to do this census? Well, it’s definitely a complicated thing, and I’m not sure exactly how to figure this out, but this is how I understand it: I do not think God verbally commanded David to take this census. I don’t think that’s what happened. Saying here that God spoke in 2 Samuel 24 is likely a Hebrew literary convention. The Hebrew people, like our author who wrote this, sometimes liked to convey God’s actions as if He were talking, as if He were speaking. They do this because God speaking and God acting are roughly the same thing. If you remember back in the book of Genesis, you have God speaking and then things happened, right? In Genesis 1:3, it says:

God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

(NIV)

Apparently, God speaking and God acting, there's a connection between them. And so that left such an impression on the Hebrew people's minds, that sometimes they'll convey God's actions as though He were speaking. And you'll notice this throughout the narrative; there are certain places where it says that God is speaking when clearly He's actually doing an action. But the author conveys it as if He's speaking, because that shows the connection between God's acts and God's words. And so what I think, in reality, in light of 1 Chronicles 21, what I think is happening here is that God is *permitting* Satan to test David to take a census. He is *permitting* it. So God permits Satan to rise up and test David. Because, you know, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we usually say, you know, "Lead us not into temptation." Right? Well, implied in that is that God has control whether we're going to be tempted, whether we're going to be allowed to be tempted or not. And perhaps, in God's anger here, perhaps He allowed Satan to tempt David to expose some evil that was going on in his life. Because sometimes that's what temptations help us to realize – that, in fact, there is some sin that we don't even know is there, and the temptation helps to bring that out for us. And God exposes David to his sin in order to bring him to repentance. And so Satan is allowed to test David to see whether he will trust in God, or whether he will trust in himself. And just as an aside, it's kind of instructive for us to realize that God will also allow temptations to take place in *our* lives, as well. Clearly, God does not tempt us to evil. As James 1:13 says:

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone...

(NIV – emphasis added)

Yet God *does* allow temptations to take place, with the intention that our faith will be strengthened. As James 1:3 says:

...the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

(NIV)

God's intention in these moments of temptation He allows into our lives is so that we might grow through them in a stronger relationship with Him. Even when things get tough, God wants us to rely on Him. And in those moments we have to trust in God, in the midst of hard temptations. And sometimes there's a hidden sin that we're not even aware of that God mercifully shows to our lives through that temptation.

But here in this narrative, David succumbs to the temptation. As he has done throughout his life, he begins to rely on his own strength rather than to rely on God for protection and for strength. Perhaps this is just a hypothesis, but perhaps maybe it's working like this. Maybe Satan is allowing another nation to rise up in power that's challenging David, and he's causing David to think, "Hokey snappers. This is not good. Another nation is getting stronger and stronger, and I'm feeling my strength is getting weaker and weaker, so I need to make sure my army is in check so I'll be able to fight off this growing threat to our nation." I don't know. The author doesn't tell us the context. All that the author wants us to know is that David succumbed to the temptation, and he did so by trusting in himself rather than trusting in God.

And so again David kind of shows his true colors! David is a failure in so many ways to resist sin. And he disappoints us. The bible doesn't cover over the fact that David is just a sinful person like us. But at the exact same time, can't we all relate to David? I mean, it's easier for us to trust in ourselves than to trust in God, when we haven't even seen Him. I find it so easy to say all the right words, like, "Lord, You're my all in all," or, "Jesus, my entire confidence is in You." Something along those lines, right? But when it comes to real life? That is an incredibly hard thing to hold onto. So we look at David and we expect David to rely on God rather than to rely on his own army, but when we think about it, he's the king! He's the king over Israel! Isn't that what kings are supposed to be doing? Isn't that actually not a bad thing to do? Isn't that a responsible thing to do? And the same thing with our lives, right? We're expected to rely on God when, in reality, oh man, we've got exams we have to write. We've got work we have to do. We have even an absence of work that we have to keep finding work! And we're told to rely on God when it seems so necessary to rely on ourselves.

See, when we've got food, clothing, and shelter on our mind, it's hard for us to trust in God! And yet, Jesus says in Matthew 6:31:

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

(NIV – emphasis added)

God has given *us* promises, but I admit that I have failed countless times to trust in those promises. I sin by trusting in myself, and by doing so, I distrust the promises of God. And then, when I think about it, I'm actually in the exact same boat as David is. The summary of his life is essentially the summary of my life, as well.

But the narrative doesn't stop there. Something very interesting starts happening. Even though David is a sinful man, David repents. In verse 9, Joab returns and he gives the number of the soldiers in Israel. Then, in verse 10 we get this statement:

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."

(NIV)

See, David realized what he did, and he *repented*. He recognized his sin for what it was, and he was sorrowful for it. And it's at that point that we begin to see something about David: that he is not defined by his sin. Though, clearly, a summary of his life is that he's a sinful person, he is not *defined* by that. Because he turns to God and relies on God for forgiveness and mercy. So often, when *I* sin I feel like hiding from God. You know, like Adam and Eve. They went and they hid from God after they sinned. Because I'm ashamed! But the same thing is with David here. David – he is ashamed! But rather than hiding from God, he turns *to* God! He realizes that, though he's violated his relationship with God, his relationship with God is something that's too important for him to abandon. True repentance requires us to value our relationship with God so much that even when we *sin* against him we take ownership of the sin, turn back to God, away from our sins, and rely on His mercy.

And the narrative continues to elaborate on this. The next verse, verse 11 talks about how God responds to David's expression of sorrow.

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.'"

(NIV)

Now, this is kind of interesting. The author kind of leaves us to feel the ominous statement there, right? He says, "I'm going to give you three options," but doesn't tell us right away what those three options are. It just helps us to feel that. Then in the next verse he goes on to say:

So Gad went to David and said to him, "Shall there come on 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."

(NIV)

Because David sinned, there are consequences to his sin. And none of us can go on sinning and never feel those consequences. Maybe it's not going to be right away, maybe it won't even be until the end of our lives, but every one of us will one day have to give an account for our sins. But it's interesting to see how David responds here, and how his response isn't of fleeing from God, which would seem to be a very rational conclusion. If I've sinned against God, I think it's pretty rational to want to run away; but he goes *to* God, and he says this:

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."

(NIV)

David understands something that so often we forget: God is a merciful, loving, and gracious God. More merciful than our fellow human beings. David's repentance keeps him from just wanting to escape the consequences of his sin. I mean, nobody likes consequences. When I sin, I want to repent so I avoid the consequences, but that is wrong-headed, because I *should* be wanting to say, "Lord, give me any consequences so long as it helps me to grow in relationship with You." And I should understand that my God whom I'm speaking with is an unbelievably merciful, loving God, who desires to show mercy. David understood the heart of God, and he does not seek to avoid the consequences. All he says is, "Please don't let me fall into the hands of humans." He simply throws himself on God's mercy, and what a defining trait to have in your life. It is something each and every one of us *can* emulate, as well. Because God has the power either to destroy David, or to give him life. He has the power, also, to either condemn us, or to give us life. And do we understand that our God is a merciful God?

And so then the story continues. It goes on. There's a plague that God then sends. He chooses the third option, and God sends a plague on the land. And the plague is killing thousands of people. Then we get, in verse 16:

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 Araunah the Jebusite.

(NIV)

Imagine this: We had a lot of crazy storms going on the past few days, right? If you noticed the clouds, they were billowing and terrifying, right? They were pretty scary. Imagine that you're in Israel in Jerusalem, and you're seeing the most epic, terrifying cloud, and in there is the angel of death, and he stops over Jerusalem only for a moment with his sword ready to strike down Jerusalem, and the whole city stands literally on the brink of entire annihilation. Then, in verse 17 David sees the angel. He sees the angel of death – I don't know what the angel of death looks like – it's probably terrifying, and he saw him. And he does not flee before the terror of that sight. The literal Grim Reaper stands poised to wipe out the City of David, and David isn't fleeing here. Instead, in that moment, he approaches God, and he says in verse 17:

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. These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall on me and my family."

(NIV)

Before the face of the angel of death, David confesses that he is the intended target. He is the intended target of the angel of death. He recognizes that he is fully at the mercy of God at this very moment, that God *could* absolutely strike him down and destroy the whole nation. That God controls his fate, whether for good or for evil. But then, verse 18 tells us this:

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."

(NIV)

The prophet sends David to go up to the very place where the angel of death was standing so that he could build an altar and do a sacrifice there. And face death face to face, and David does it. And he goes up and Araunah the Jebusite, he actually offers to give the land to David for free, because he's probably terrified, as well. But David then says this in verse 24. And notice it doesn't say David; here it says, "The king." Interesting.

But the king replied to Araunah – who's trying to give the land for free – "No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing."

(NIV – emphasis added)

True repentance is not about getting away from the punishment; true repentance is about living in restored relationship with God, no matter the cost. And that was David's heart. And then the story finishes in the middle of verse 24. It finishes like this:

So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen and paid fifty shekels of silver for them. David built an altar to the Lord there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then the Lord answered his prayer in behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped.

(NIV)

Why on earth would making an altar and doing a sacrifice mean anything? What's the big significance behind that? Because, apparently, once he does that, God ceases the plague, and He calls the angel of death away. What's so significant about a sacrifice and building the altar? I think it's because without the shedding of blood, there can be no forgiveness of sins. Even though David shows a repentant heart, that repentance isn't what saves him. By sacrificing, he recognizes that somebody is going to have to take his place, because God is a holy and just God, and without the shedding of blood, there can be no forgiveness of sins.

Now, see, the animal that was sacrificed on that very day didn't take David's place; it was only a sign that somebody else will have to take the place of David, and that was Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the one who took David's place; 1,000 years later, but He was the one that needed to die in David's place so that God could forgive him. And that shows us something. That shows us that repentance isn't what saved David. Repentance is the heart attitude that is necessary to *receive* that forgiveness, to want to have that forgiveness rather than to run away from God. It's a heart attitude that understands that my sins can only be forgiven by the death of another, through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

So David is a man after God's own heart because his heart led him to God and to receive the forgiveness that God Himself would supply. And that's what made David the king after God's own heart, and that's what shows such an apt summary of his life and why this is the conclusion to his story. It's not the death of David that's recorded here; it is the death of someone else that stands in David's place. *That* is the summary of David's life. Yes, David is a sinner, but he had a heart that allowed him to receive the forgiveness of the Lord. And the bible records his life because each one of us are like David; each one of us have sinned before God and are deserving of condemnation. Every one of us sins and continues to struggle with sin, but if we had a heart like David, we would turn to God rather than from God, and rely on His mercy because we've got no other option. And we, too, can be a person after God's own heart, because being a person after God's own heart is not about being perfect. It's about being repentant. Turning away from our sins to have relationship with God – *that* is what makes a person after God's own heart. And that's what David's story tells us.

And, like David, our repentance doesn't mean anything unless someone takes our place, and that's why we're doing communion today. Because communion shows us that unless somebody takes our place, we cannot live in the presence of a holy God. Just like David's sacrifice was a sign that someone's going to have to take his place, so the bread and the cup are signs. They don't have anything meaningful, necessarily, within themselves; they're a sign that Jesus Christ had to take our place. When the deacons will hand out the bread and the cup, it's as if each one of us are invited to go up with David on that mountain and face the angel of death. But we can look at the angel of death and say to him, "Our confidence is in God, and our merciful God, and Jesus' sacrifice is enough to save me." So death no longer has a hold on us because we believe in Jesus Christ. Only let us grab hold of Jesus. Let us repent of our sins, and hold fast to our merciful God, and let us all have a heart like David, a man after God's own heart. Amen? [congregation said, "Amen."]