

# **The Life of David**

## **David's Census**

*2 Samuel 24:1-25*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

February 28, 2021

# David's Census

## Scripture

Today we conclude our study of Second Samuel. However, we still have a few more lessons in the coming weeks in First Kings before we conclude our study of “The Life of David.”

The last chapter in Second Samuel tells us about David taking a census of his people. We are familiar with a census, are we not? The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines *census* as “an official count or survey of a population.”<sup>1</sup> The United States Census is legally mandated in the US Constitution, and takes place every 10 years. The first census was taken in 1790. There have been 23 censuses since that time, with the most recent one completed in 2020.

It is a matter of wisdom for countries to take a regular census of their population. That is what makes 2 Samuel 24 such a puzzling chapter when we read it for the first time. David took a census of the nation and it turned out to be a great calamity. Thousands of people died. Why? What was the problem?

Let's read about David's census in 2 Samuel 24:1-25:

**<sup>1</sup>Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go, number Israel and Judah.” <sup>2</sup>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.” <sup>3</sup>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?” <sup>4</sup>But the king's word prevailed against**

---

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds., *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Then they came to Gilead, and to Kadash in the land of the Hittites; and they came to Dan, and from Dan they went around to Sidon, <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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." <sup>11</sup> And when David arose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, <sup>12</sup> "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.' " <sup>13</sup> 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." <sup>14</sup> 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."

<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> And when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented from the calamity and said to the angel who was working destruction among the people, "It is enough; now stay your hand." And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. <sup>17</sup> Then 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.”

<sup>18</sup> And 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.” <sup>19</sup> So David went up at Gad’s word, as the Lord commanded. <sup>20</sup> And 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. <sup>21</sup> And 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.” <sup>22</sup> Then 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. <sup>23</sup> All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king.” And Araunah said to the king, “May the Lord your God accept you.” <sup>24</sup> But 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. <sup>25</sup> And 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 Samuel 24:1-25)

## Introduction

In her book titled *The Crucifixion*, Fleming Rutledge writes that on September 2, 1990, a murder occurred in New York City that horrified the nation. The Watkins family from Provo, Utah, a father and mother with their two barely-grown sons, had come to the city for a long-anticipated trip to attend the US Open tennis matches. While waiting on the subway platform for the train to Flushing Meadows, the family was assaulted by a band of four

youths. The older of the two sons went to his mother's rescue as she was being kicked in the face, and he was killed in the attempt. The judge, Edwin Torres, sentenced all four attackers to life without parole, the toughest sentence possible in New York at that time, and in doing so issued a striking statement expressing grave alarm for a society in which "a band of marauders can surround, pounce upon, and kill a boy in front of his parents [and then] stride up the block to Roseland and dance until 4 a.m. as if they had stepped on an insect. [These acts were] a visitation that the devil himself would hesitate to conjure up. *That cannot go unpunished.*"

Fleming goes on to write:

It makes many people queasy nowadays to talk about the wrath of God, but there can be no turning away from this prominent biblical theme....If we are resistant to the idea of the wrath of God, we might pause to reflect the next time we are outraged about something [much smaller than a murder but still worthy of our anger] – about our property values being threatened, or our children's educational opportunities being limited, or our tax breaks being eliminated. All of us are capable of anger about something. God's anger, however, is pure....The wrath of God is not an emotion that flares up from time to time, as though God has temper tantrums. It is a way of describing his absolute enmity against all wrong and his coming to set matters right.<sup>2</sup>

Our culture does not like to talk about the wrath of God. Many Christians don't like to talk about the wrath of God. But the Bible talks about the wrath of God. Fleming is right in saying God does not have temper tantrums. No. When the Bible talks about the wrath of God, "it is a way of describing his absolute enmity against all wrong and his coming to set matters right."

That is what is going on in 2 Samuel 24.

---

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 130-131.

## Lesson

Second Samuel 24:1-25 shows us the wrath of God.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Because of the Wrath of God, Sin Was Committed (24:1-9)
2. Because of the Wrath of God, Judgment Was Delivered (24:10-15)
3. Because of the Wrath of God, Mercy Was Pleaded (24:16-17)
4. Because of the Wrath of God, Atonement Was Made (24:18-25)

### I. **Because of the Wrath of God, Sin Was Committed (24:1-9)**

First, because of the wrath of God, sin was committed.

Let's begin by noting what was said in verse 1a, **“Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.”** Why was God angry with Israel? We do not know. The text does not tell us. In fact, there is a lot in this chapter that is left unexplained. That does not mean that we cannot understand the text. It simply means that we must hold our views somewhat tentatively because we do not have clear answers to our questions. One commentator suggests:

The Lord brought this about because His anger was directed against the people on account of their misdeeds, for which they had not yet been punished. Hadn't the people rejected David for Absalom and then for Sheba? They had rejected the *head* of the covenant – and thereby the Lord's covenant itself. For this the Lord now intended to punish them.<sup>3</sup>

It is possible that the Lord was now punishing his people for

---

<sup>3</sup> S.G. DeGraaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, 4 vols. (St. Catherines: Paideia, 1978), 2:188.

rejecting him when they rejected David. But, the text does not explicitly state that as a reason for the wrath of God.

The text goes on to say that the Lord **“incited David against them, saying, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah’ ”** (24:1b). You may recall that this same incident is recorded in 1 Chronicles 21. There we read, “Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel” (1 Chronicles 21:1). Is this difference between the two verses an error in the Bible? Could it be that both God and Satan incited David to number Israel?

The answer to the first question is *No*. The Bible contains no errors. So, that is not the way to move forward.

The answer to the second question is *Yes*. God is sovereign over all things, even over the actions of Satan. The way to understand these two texts is to see that God was angry with Israel, so he incited David to number Israel by means of Satan’s temptation.

I have asserted that because of God’s wrath, sin was committed. But what exactly was David’s sin? Again, we are not told what was David’s sin. Commentators differ in their proposals regarding David’s sin.

Some say that David’s sin was that he failed to require a half shekel, which was required when a census was taking, according to Exodus 30:12.

Others say that David’s sin was that he numbered those who were under twenty years old and not yet ready to bear arms, according to 1 Chronicles 27:23-24.

Others speculate that David’s sin was that his census of the people was an act of unbelief by not trusting in the Lord to protect his people in case of war.

And still others think that David’s sin was the result of pride because he was pleased with his military strength.

We are not told what was David’s sin. It may have been a combination of each of these proposals. The point is that God was angry with his people, and he allowed David to commit sin.

So, David gave the order to number the people (v. 2), Joab objected (v. 3), David over-ruled Joab (v. 4), Joab and his commanders completed the count in just under ten months (vv. 5-8), and the count came in at 1.3 million men in Israel and Judah.

Some people struggle with the truth that because of the wrath of God, sin was committed. It seems backwards to them. Surely God does not allow us to commit sin because he is angry with us? But remember what Paul wrote to the Romans in Romans 1:18, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” After explaining the reason for the wrath of God, Paul goes on to say – three times – that “God gave them up” to all kinds of sin (Romans 1:24-25; 26-27; 28-32).

So, because of the wrath of God, sin was committed.

## **II. Because of the Wrath of God, Judgment Was Delivered (24:10-15)**

Second, because of the wrath of God, judgment was delivered.

In verse 10, David felt conviction for his sin against the Lord. We read, **“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.’ ”** It was only after David recognized and confessed his sin that the Lord sent his prophet Gad to David.

The Lord gave David three options from which to choose, and each one was terrible: (1) three years of famine, (2) three months of fleeing from foes, or (3) three days of pestilence (24:13). David chose option 2, for he said in verse 14, **“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.”**

Thus the Lord's judgment was delivered, as we read in verse 15, **“So the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning until the appointed time. And there died of the people from Dan to Beersheba 70,000 men.”** One out of twenty men died.

### **III. Because of the Wrath of God, Mercy Was Pleaded (24:16-17)**

Third, because of the wrath of God, mercy was pleaded.

David had already acknowledged that the mercy of the Lord is great. Now we read in verse 17, **“Then 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.’ ”** David was thinking like a shepherd. The people of Israel – the flock of God – were dying. He begged for God's mercy, and that the Lord's judgment should fall on him instead of on the people, the sheep, of God. So the Lord told the angel, **“It is enough; now stay your hand”** (24:16).

We need to keep in mind that David's plea for mercy was not mere wishful thinking. He *knew* God. Was it not David who had experienced the mercy of God after his heinous sin with Bathsheba and Uriah who wrote in Psalm 51:1, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions”? David's experience with God taught him that he was right to plead for God's mercy. David knew that God's mercy is kinder and gentler than any disaster that could ever come his way.

Dale Ralph Davis tells the story that some time ago newspapers told of an episode at the Brookfield (Illinois) Zoo. A three-year-old toddler fell eighteen feet into an area inhabited by seven gorillas. It turns out that the toddler was still alert when taken to a

hospital where he would be listed in critical condition. But how did he ever get out of gorilla-land? Binti, a seven-year-old female gorilla, picked up the child, cradled him in her arms, and put him down near a door where zookeepers could get him. Davis says, “I suppose the story seems amazing to us because we do not customarily associate gorillas with kindness. We may be grateful to Binti but would prefer not to trust her with another child.” And then Davis goes on to note, “I wonder if in our gut-level thinking we don’t have a gorilla view of God’s mercies? We tend to look upon mercy as a divine exception rather than as the divine character. Not so David. Even in his wrath, David knew he was not facing a gorilla-God.”<sup>4</sup>

#### **IV. Because of the Wrath of God, Atonement Was Made (24:18-25)**

And finally, because of the wrath of God, atonement was made.

Verse 16 told us that when the Lord told the angel to stop working destruction among the people, “the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.” Then Gad went and told David, **“Go up, raise an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite”** (24:18). So David went and did as the Lord commanded him. In typical ancient fashion, Araunah and David haggled back and forth over the price for the property. David knew that he must pay the full price because it was to belong to the Lord for the sacrifice that was to be made. So David bought the threshing floor, the surrounding land, and the oxen in order to make a sacrifice there. We read in verse 25, **“And David built there an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the Lord responded to the**

---

<sup>4</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 320.

**plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.”**

We learn of the significance of this property in 2 Chronicles 3:1, where we read, “Then 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 [that is, Araunah] the Jebusite.”

Do you see the significance of the property? It was on Mount Moriah that Abraham placed Isaac, his beloved son, to offer him as a sacrifice to the Lord (cf. Genesis 22). As Abraham was about to kill his son Isaac, the angel of the Lord called to him and prevented him from killing Isaac. Instead, the Lord provided a ram for a sacrifice in place of Isaac.

Now, more than a thousand years later, the angel of the Lord again stopped the killing on the very same spot on Mount Moriah. David offered his life for the lives of his people. David did not of course die at that time. Later, his son Solomon built the temple on the Mount of Moriah, where thousands upon thousands of animals were sacrificed each year to atone for sin.

That all looked forward to David's Greater Son Jesus who, a thousand years after David, did die a short distance from Moriah. He died to make atonement for David's sin and also for the sin of every one of his elect.

## **Conclusion**

Therefore, having analyzed the account of David's census in 2 Samuel 24:1-25, let us be sure that we are covered by Christ's atonement.

Atonement is the means of reconciliation between God and people. God's justice has to be satisfied. The penalty for sin must be paid. Jesus satisfied the justice of God by his life and his death so that we might be reconciled to God.

Are you sure that Jesus has atoned for your sin? Amen.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can  
be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons).
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp).
3. [www.sermonaudio.com/source\\_detail.asp?sourceid=Fred-dyFritz](http://www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=Fred-dyFritz).

## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)