

“David’s Last Days”

(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 84)

2 Samuel 24 – 1 Kings 2; 1 Chronicles 21 - 29

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We’re going to wrap up the stories about King David today. I’m somewhat reluctant to do this – it’s hard to close the book on this incredibly complex man who had such a profound impact on Israel and left such a lasting legacy on both Judaism and Christianity. I think I could spend my whole life studying David and still feel like I had a host of unanswered questions. An amazing amount of detail has been preserved in the pages of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles; it’s hard to keep track of all the characters; you just have to keep reading and re-reading. You gain more understanding each time you go through it.

But there are some pieces of the story that may never make sense. The census, for example. Near the end of David’s reign, David orders that a census be taken of the entire population of the land – or, rather, the entire population of the land that would be eligible for military service. Women weren’t counted; children weren’t counted; the elderly weren’t counted; only those who could fight in battle were counted. We might feel today that this isn’t the proper way to conduct a census, but nobody back then complained about the method. The issue wasn’t *who* should be counted – the issue was *that* anybody should be counted at all. It was considered a form of sin. When Joab, David’s general, hears the order, he questions it: “Why does my master the King want to do this?” (2 Samuel 24.3) That’s what he says in the version of the story in 2 Samuel. Over in 1 Chronicles, what Joab says is this: “Why do you want to do this? Why bring guilt on Israel?” (1 Chronicles 21.3) But the King’s order is the King’s order, and so Joab obeys, sending men out to every town in Israel. It takes nearly ten months to count everybody; when all is said and done, there are well over a million men in Israel who can fight – but a sin is still a sin. God sends a plague upon Israel, and 70,000 Israelites die. Questions abound – why would David order the census; why was it considered a sin; why did the Israelites have to suffer so greatly for their leader’s mistake? The biblical account provides no easy answers to any of these questions – and it becomes even more complex when we notice that according to 2 Samuel, it was *God* who had told David to conduct the census in the first place. Yes, really – 2 Samuel 24 opens with the statement, “The LORD burned with anger against Israel again, and he incited David against them: Go and count the people of Israel and Judah.” (2 Samuel 24.1) God is angry, so he orders a census; David conducts the census, so Israel gets punished. It feels strange. *Why would God do that?* Apparently, the sages of ancient Israel wondered the same thing. When the account was re-written a while later by the scribe who compiled the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, it’s not *God* who orders the census; it’s *Satan*. “*Satan* arose against

Israel and incited David to count Israel.” (1 Chronicles 21.1) In verse 7 we are told “God was offended by this census.” Satan’s for it; God’s against it – that makes so much more sense than what we read in 2 Samuel. But even the word *Satan* may imply more than what the Chronicler intended, for in its earliest uses in the Bible – like in the book of Job – Satan is a heavenly adversary, not the wholly-evil Lord of the Pit that he was understood to be later on. Still, *something* compelled David to count the men of Israel, and both accounts agree that this was a *bad thing*. Was this *God’s* will, or was David under the influence of *evil*, or could it somehow have been *both*? Some questions truly do not have easy answers!

This takes us back to one of the key questions we were wrestling with a couple months ago: was David a good king or a bad king? I had said: “David was a very complex person. It’s hard to pigeonhole him into one category or another. There were lots of things he did really well. There were some things he did poorly, and some mistakes he made that cost him dearly. He had some strengths that Israel truly needed, and certain weaknesses which he *sometimes* was able to overcome and sometimes *not*. He was a man of deep faith, yet he did not always act in spiritually mature ways. He did some truly great things, and he made some *really bad* mistakes.” Which, honestly, makes him someone we can relate to. Flawed. Imperfect. Aspiring to do good, yet succumbing to the temptations of sin. We want to be able to say that he was clearly *good* or *bad*, *this* or *that* – yet when you look at your life, are you clearly *this* or *that*, good or bad? At the end of the day, those who have faith in Christ are declared to be righteous even though we have not lived a fully righteous life. That’s grace. We want to pass a *human* judgment, but it’s the *divine* judgment that truly matters. Maybe we should just let God have the final word on David. We’re not qualified to be the ultimate judge of *anybody’s* character. Let God take care of that.

Eventually the day comes when David is feeble and weak, confined to his bed, and dying. One of his sons, Adonijah, decides to make a move. Adonijah is the only son of David’s fifth wife, Haggith, and he may be the eldest of David’s sons, following the deaths of Absalom and Amnon. Adonijah gathers around him two men who had been extremely important to David: David’s general Joab and the high priest Abiathar. Joab had fought and won many battles for David and had been extremely helpful during Absalom’s rebellion, but Joab had questioned David’s wisdom at times, like in the matter of the census, and David eventually removed Joab from his position. Abiathar had also been a strong supporter of David but may have fallen out of favor – or perhaps, like Joab, Abiathar was beginning to question some of David’s actions. Either way, Joab and Abiathar both help David’s son Adonijah in a bid for power: Adonijah invites all the royal servants and all but one of David’s other sons to a great feast, and in front of the assembled body he proclaims himself king of Israel. The one half-brother not invited to the feast was Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba. There were others who were conspicuously absent: Zadok, another high priest who was important during David’s lifetime; Benaiah, one of David’s most prominent warriors and his personal bodyguard; several other noteworthy warriors loyal to David; and (especially) the prophet Nathan, who delivered God’s Word to David when David couldn’t hear it on his own. *Many* of the important men in David’s life were at the feast, but a few were conspicuously absent. They hadn’t been invited. That’s a clear indication that Adonijah knew that what he was doing was wrong and against his father’s wishes. Nathan hears about it; he tells Bathsheba; she tells David; David summons Nathan the prophet and Zadok the priest and Benaiah the bodyguard and tells them to find Solomon and put him on David’s mule. “Zadok the priest and the prophet Nathan will anoint him king

over Israel,” instructs David. “Blow the ram’s horn and say, ‘Long live King Solomon!’ You will follow him. He will enter and sit on my throne, and so he will succeed me as king. I have appointed him to become ruler over Israel and Judah.” (1 Kings 1.34-35) This they do, accompanied by the sound of flute-players and celebration. Word reaches the feast where Adonijah and his supporters have gathered; they flee in fear; Adonijah himself takes refuge in the tabernacle, which was still the primary center of worship for the people of Israel. Solomon allows Adonijah to return home, on condition of good behavior. What ultimately happens between Adonijah and Solomon – well, that’s a story for next week.

So David’s kingdom passes to Solomon. Solomon returns to David’s bed, where his father gives him some final instructions. Most important are these words: “Be strong and be a man. Guard what is owed to the Lord your God, walking in his ways and observing his laws, his commands, his judgments, and his testimonies, just as it is written in the Instruction from Moses. In this way you will succeed in whatever you do and wherever you go. So also the Lord will confirm the word he spoke to me: ‘If your children will take care to walk before me faithfully, with all their heart and all their being, then one of your children will never fail to be on the throne of Israel.’” (1 Kings 2.2-4) Then, “David lay down with his ancestors and was buried in David’s City. He ruled over Israel forty years.” (1 Kings 2.10-11)

So passes the man who was arguably *the* most important and most complex king Israel ever had. It passes to the son of the woman with whom David had committed adultery and because of whom he had resorted to murder. It’s fittingly ironic then, at the very end of David’s life, he stresses to this son the importance of observing God’s law constantly and faithfully, with all his heart and all his soul. I have to conclude that, in the end, David learned from his mistakes. He recognized the folly of his sins. He knew what the Lord did to him because of his great sins, and also what the Lord, in his mercy, chose *not* to do. David had learned: *you’ve got to let God be God*. Don’t try to live your life pretending that God doesn’t exist. Don’t try to skirt around clear instructions from your heavenly Father. Whatever power and influence you have in life, remember that it comes to you from *God* – and if you abuse it, you just might lose it. Or lose people you care about, or people who have been placed under your charge. God is *holy*, not to be trifled with. David had to learn those lessons the hard way, but in the end he did ultimately learn them. So at his deathbed, he passes on to his son the most important lessons he has learned in life, and they’re lessons about *God*, lessons learned through hard and sometimes bitter experience. One sentence sums it all up: “Guard what is owed to the Lord your God, walking in his ways and observing his laws, his commands, his judgments, and his testimonies, just as it is written in the Instruction from Moses.” If David had done that faithfully, all his life, we wouldn’t still be debating three millennia later whether or not he was a good king. The most important lesson to be learned from David’s life is the lesson he learned himself: “Guard what is owed to the Lord your God, walking in his ways and observing his laws, his commands, his judgments, and his testimonies, just as it is written in the Instruction from Moses.” To put that more simply: we gotta know God’s Word ... and then we gotta *live by it*, to the best of our ability, with all our heart and all our soul, every single day of our life. Not an easy task, as David himself knew well. But, honestly, the *most* important thing any of us *ever* do.

Thanks be to God for King David ... for all his flaws ... and for all his faith.

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