

Title: Grace Alone  
Text: 2 Samuel 24.15-25  
Theme: In wrath God remembers mercy  
Series: 2 Samuel (conclusion on Reformation Sunday, 2023)  
Prop Stmtnt: In wrath God remembers mercy because of atonement

A little way from where Cathi and I were staying in Kenya was a nature preserve that had elephants. One of the men explained to us that the preserve was marked off by an electric fence. If an elephant ever ran up against the fence, he would only do it that once because an elephant never forgot. He would never go near the fence again. Wow. Hey parents, wouldn't that be amazing if you only had to tell your kids something once and they never forget and never tried being stupid again? Wouldn't that be great if God only had to tell us one time and we would never forget? Wouldn't that be so good and save us so much grief and heartache? Sadly, that is not our story. The default position of our hearts is to look for reasons and ways for us to trust in ourselves. In David's case, his numbering of his soldiers was motivated by pridefulness. Look at what I have done. Look at how well protected, organized, fortified and secure we are. He was looking for reasons why he could trust in what he had done, which always takes away from finding our peace and security in God.

There can be wisdom in knowing the details of your resources. In giving an illustration on counting the cost of being a disciple, Jesus, in Luke 14.28, 29 spoke of a builder who before he built a tower, counted the cost so that he had enough resources to finish the job. In that case, the builder had to know how much money and resources he had in order to ensure that he could finish what he started. However, in Luke 12, Jesus told the story of the man whose abundance of grain and goods became his source of security. He built large barns to store all of this stuff so that he could relax, eat, drink and be merry. Jesus said that this man was a fool. In the first case, wisdom motivated the process of gathering data. In the second case, it was pride. And sadly, that is the case here. In our text, David has, for a season, played the fool. Perhaps in his later years, he was looking back over all that he had accomplished and his heart was being drawn to find his security in what he had done, instead of God. Numbering his troops was necessary for organization purposes, but had become a stumbling block for David. His order to do so, was disgusting to Joab and he said so. Joab was the commander of the army. Wouldn't he want to an up-to-date and accurate number? Not for these reasons and he warned David, but David's command prevailed. So, the numbering began. It was then David's conscience smote him and he confessed his sin to God.

God heard his confession and sent the prophet Gad to David to let him know that he was right. His sin was severe. Therefore, the consequences would be hard. 3 years of famine? 3 months of military defeat? Or 3 days of pestilence? 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."

Read Text:

Our reaction to certain passages reveals just how great the chasm is between us and God and this is text is a prime example. Within less than 3 days, 70,000 men die from a disease that sweeps through the nation. 70,000. This response on the part of God is difficult for us to grasp because we do not understand just how white-hot the righteousness of God is, and therefore, how offensive our sin and rebellion is.

1. **Sin is exceedingly serious to God.** (15)

This is not the first time that God demonstrated how serious of an issue rejecting him and his Word really is. The removal of Adam and Eve from the garden and the cursing of the earth was cataclysmic. Did we learn? No. About 1,000 years later came the flood. Did we learn? No, then came Babel, followed by Sodom and Gomorrah. Later we have the accounts of the 10 plagues in Egypt and the complete destruction of Pharaoh's army. Surely, Israel of all people would learn not to distrust God. But, they didn't. Starting with the golden calf and moving forward, the wilderness wanderings were marked by complaining, rebellion, and significant judgements. This went on for almost 40 years. The 400 years of the judges was more of the same. And yet, we just don't seem to believe God. In fact, we tend to read these accounts and think that God is having a divine hissy fit.

We really need to stop right here and ask ourselves some hard questions. Do you think that your view holiness is better than God's? Do you think that your view and definition of justice is morally superior and is innately purer than God's? Do you think that your sense of what is fair and right is more noble than God's? The short answer to those questions is a resounding "No!" In fact, we do not have the moral, nor intellectual capacity to think on his level. There are certain doctrines that people find offensive and you hear the idea that when I get to heaven, God's got some explaining to do. God does not answer to you. God tells us what we need to know, but not all that there is to know because we can't grasp it.

"How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans 11.33b) "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (11.34). The answer is, no one. Certainly not you or me. We are not qualified to sit in judgment of God and think that we know better or that we don't like this or that. If we really understood how holy and righteous God is and how offensive our unbelief and unfaithfulness is, we would be overwhelmed with amazement that we still alive and breathing! God does not owe us anything!

Sin is exceedingly serious to God and those, like David, who are in greater positions of authority and influence will experience greater consequences because they have been given more. The greater the role, the greater the accountability. God responded clearly and decisively because he did not want his servant David, to finish his life and reign thinking and believing that all of this was because of David and for David. God loved David too much to let him get away with this.

2. **Even in wrath, God remembers mercy.** (15-17)

David chose the 3 days of pestilence because this would put him and his people directly in the hand of God and as David said, *“Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great.”* (24.14b) David was right. 70,000 men had died, from Dan to Beersheba. Was it a pestilence or an angel that brought death? Both. The angel brought the pestilence and it sounds like this went in waves of concentric circles until the angel came near to Jerusalem.

1 Chronicles 21.16 gives us a little more information. David and the elders were in Jerusalem and were clothed in sackcloth. David had owned his sin and had confessed it to God and to the elders. They were in Jerusalem and (I am assuming because of the sackcloth) were praying and asking God for mercy. News of the pestilence was coming in and of course, it was distressing. But, then “David lifted up his eyes and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem.” David and the elders were prepared for the worst. They fell on their faces and pleaded with God for mercy.

In this moment, the curtain is pulled back and we get a glimpse of just how vulnerable we are to justice of God. In a moment, the sword would come down and death would sweep over the city, but just before the sword dropped, the LORD spoke.

Now look with me at 2 Samuel 24.16. (read)

What do you see there? Is this a heartless, ego-maniac, ultra-sensitive smashmouth narcissist? Is this a God who mocks your pain and delights in terrorizing you with judgment? No, David was right. Even in wrath, God remembered mercy. He spared Jerusalem. Do not miss this. God’s mercy stayed God’s justice. This begs the question that we should be asking. The question that we tend to ask in arrogance is, why does God judge our sin? Why is God so upset about our sin? The question we should ask is, “how can God be merciful?” Go back to the scene of the angel with the sword drawn. Of course, we are relieved to read that God said, “It is enough.” But how? How can God save us from God and why did he do it right then and there?

The answer to that question makes my head spin even as it makes my heart big. The summary answer is: God is able to forgive only by a perfectly atoning sacrifice, received by confession and faith. But the details involved are sobering even as they are fascinating. When the LORD stopped the angel, he was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. David sees the angel, he knows what is at stake and now David speaks in a way in v.17 in which he offers himself in place of his people, because he is one who has sinned. The Lord answers David’s request, but not in a way that anyone could imagine. David is right. An offering needs to be made because, it is through the innocent sacrifice of worthy offering, the just wrath of God is appeased.

### 3. **Through sacrifice, wrath is appeased.** (18-25)

The prophet Gad is sent by the LORD to tell David that he is to build an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. Now when you read this account, it is easy to imagine that as the angel was about to lower his sword against Jerusalem that David and his elders fell on their faces and begged God for mercy and God relented and granted their request. But, when you

read this text and the parallel one in 1 Chronicles 21, that is not what happened. The angel was at this threshing floor just north of Jerusalem, had his sword drawn and was about to move against Jerusalem, when the LORD stopped him. The LORD stopped the angel at this point. David and his men saw the angel but did not realize that the pestilence was over and they pray for mercy even as David offers himself in place of his people. So, God picked this place to stop the plague and then God sent Gad to tell David that this was the place where David was to build an altar to God.

Threshing floors were set on the highest pieces of land in order to take advantage of the wind. This threshing floor was actually higher in elevation than the city of Jerusalem that was just to its south. David and his servants leave the city and head up the mountain in order to do what the LORD said. Araunah looks down and sees the king and his servants approaching. Did he have any idea of what had just happened? We don't know. But keep in mind that Araunah is a Jebusite. These were the people who lived in the city of Jerusalem for centuries even after Israel had taken over much of the land. It wasn't until David came along that Jerusalem was finally taken and then made the capital city of the nation. Araunah pays homage to David and then asks David the reason for this meeting. David tells Araunah that he wants to purchase his threshing floor so he can build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be averted from the people.

Araunah is all in on that. He offers David the land. He offers David wood for the altar and animals for the offering. He seems to be pretty insistent that David take it, but David refuses. He then tells Araunah that he is going to pay him for it because David cannot give an offering to God that doesn't cost him anything, because that would not be an offering. David then purchases the threshing floor and the oxen. Now look at verse 25.

*"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."* The end. Wait a minute! That's it? That's how the book ends?! Why does the book end like this? This seems a bit anti-climactic. Oh no! In fact, this is the point. This final text in this book is the convergence of so many things that I could do an entire series on them. Let me point out a few things before we take unpack what I consider to be the larger ones. 1) David did not play the king card and take the land. He bought it. Araunah offered it to David for free, but David would not go for that. Based on the customs of the day, I don't think that Araunah was serious. He was showing deference and respect, but probably did not really mean that David could have it for free. This is a similar type of conversation that happened to Abraham when he wanted to purchase a burial plot for Rachel in Genesis 23. The man who owned the land, Ephron, offered the land to Abraham for free, but Abraham wants to purchase it. Ephron casually mentions that it is worth 400 shekels of silver, but then says, "what is that between you and me?" You can have it to bury your dead. Abraham insists on buying it and he does. This marks the first time that Abraham actually owns a piece of land that God had promised to him and his children. Now, 1,000 years later, David is purchasing another piece of land, so that there is no question. This land belongs to David fair and square. 2) This land was purchased in order to build an altar and offer sacrifices. This is very important. At this point, the Tabernacle had been relocated to

Jerusalem. David could have simply gone back to Jerusalem in order to offer sacrifices, but it was God who sent word to David that he was supposed to raise an altar to the LORD right here, on this spot. 3) The offering that David made, that is the price that he paid for the small piece of land and for the animals was not cheap. This was costly. A sacrifice offered that is without cost, is not really a sacrifice. 4) There was a clear connection between the plague stopping here, the people of God being spared and David building an altar. This has a distinctive Passover feel to it. The blood of an innocent lamb was applied to the doorposts of the Israelites in Egypt and the death angel passed over them.

This is all very interesting, but still does not answer the question as to why the author of the book viewed this as a fitting and significant conclusion. 1) The significance of the land. While David purchased the threshing floor and oxen for 50 shekels of silver, he then purchased that entire piece of land that the threshing floor sat on for 600 shekels. That piece of land was the summit of Mt. Moriah. Now you see, don't you? This was the same piece of land where God told Abraham to journey to 1,000 years before and offer his son to God. Abraham did and as he raised his knife against Isaac, God stopped him and showed him a ram, a sacrifice that could be offered instead. Now, a 1,000 years later, God stops the impending death and arranges for a substitute to be offered in place. What only God knew then when he directed Abraham to this spot, and what only God knew then, when he stopped the angel at this place, and what only God knew then when he directed David to build an altar, was that this was going to be the very spot, where the Temple would be built, where the altar would set, where offerings would be offered and where the Holy of Holies would sit. A holy God could only live with his sinful people by means of a substitutionary atonement offered in their place in order to appease and just wrath of a righteous God.

1,000 years after this, David's greater Son would be offered up as a sacrifice for our sins on an altar called a cross. This time, the Father did not say stop, but he allowed his Son to die so that our sin could be atoned for and, his resurrection from the dead proved that it is. The offering up of the perfect life of Jesus in death would be the costliest sacrifice in the universe. But it did not cost us anything. It cost Jesus his life that he gave in your place. And when Jesus died, his death ended the need for any other sacrifices for sin, ever. In fact, on this spot, the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies, was torn in two from top to bottom. The way to God and the way for God to live with his people is now permanently open because of Christ.

Today, this piece of land is at the heart of the violent tension in Israel. There is no temple because on this very spot sits a mosque. The Muslims claim this as their own and the Dome of the Rock that was built there originally in 700 A.D. But, of course the Jews long for and pray for the day when they take it back. After all, David bought it. It belongs to them. So, here we are 3,000 years after David and this little piece of land will demand the attention of the entire world in a way that I think will be bigger than anyone could imagine. Is this why God directed the author to conclude like this? It's part of it. Let's go back to the beginning for a second and then I think we will see.

1 Samuel began with an insignificant family of believers who were traveling to the tabernacle in order to offer sacrifices there. The high priest was a tragedy and his sons were morally decadent. The land was at the mercy of her enemies and in short order, the Ark of the Covenant would be stolen by the Philistines. Look at where we are now. In the span of 100 years, Israel now has borders, an army, a capital city, a functioning priesthood and a king. He is not perfect and this kingdom is not perfect. There is no temple, yet, but this is way better and yet, there is so much more to come. O beloved, there is.

One day, there will be a new Jerusalem, but this new Jerusalem will not have a temple, because the entire, massive city will be the temple. God will live with his people. He will be able to live with us and enjoy us forever because his Son, our Savior, our King offered up his life in our place. He took our plague. We were spared and we will live with him and enjoy him forever.