

# **David's Final Lessons**

## **1 Samuel 15-24**



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We have now come to the end of the Book of 2 Samuel. We are going to look at the unlikely way the writer chose to end it; which was to discuss the sin of David in doing the census. This was a strange way of ending the book, as most of us would want to end it with a climaxing story of triumph, or a dedication to someone's achievements. But 2 Samuel ended almost in a sour note, saying that Israel's best hope for a king still fell short. But as we shall witness, the Bible's common methodology of exposing the most bizarre weaknesses of its greatest hero is and will always be a testament that all man sin and fall short of the glory of God; and that the events that transpired acted but as a foreshadow of the perfect and infallible hope that is to be found in Christ. And we shall also see this typological message in 2 Samuel, which I shall attempt to explain today.

So, let's go on with the story of David. Towards the end of 2 Samuel, we will witness two events which are related to the House of David and the House of Saul.

1. The Rebellion of the House of David (Absalom) and the House of Saul (Sheba)
2. The unresolved sin of the House of Saul (punished with a famine) and the subtle sin of the house of David (punished with a plague)

Be patient as I try to explain its significance, and how it relates with the greater promise of Jesus Christ, the one Messiah from the House of David.

## **1. The Rebellion of the House of David and the House of Saul**

The writer, I think, intends to correlate the two rebellions by describing them in the same manner:

- *Then Absalom sent secret messengers throughout the tribes of Israel to say, "as soon as you hear the sound of the trumpets, then say, 'Absalom is king in Hebron.' "* (15:10)
- *Now a troublemaker named Sheba son of Bicri, a Benjamite, happened to be there. He sounded the trumpet and shouted, 'We have no share in David, no part in Jesse's son! Every man to his tent, O Israel'* (20:1)

Now, Absalom's identity was clear enough, being David's own flesh and blood. About Sheba, we are told that he is of the tribe of Benjamin, and therefore from the same tribe as Saul. A study Bible gave a more familial possibility, by saying that Sheba may even have been a near relative of Saul's, if Bicri can legitimately be linked with the Bechorath named in Saul's genealogy in 1 Sam 9:1<sup>i</sup>.

So, at the later stage of David's reign, he was confronted with two rebellions, one from the House of David, and another from the House of Saul.

## **2. The Unresolved Sin of the House of Saul and the Subtle Sin of the House of David**

Notice that the writer did not make clear exactly when these two events actually transpired. The wording may suggest that the two stories may not be chronologically placed, and may even happen before the rebellion of Sheba.

- *"During the reign of David, there was a famine for three successive years..."* (21:1). All the writer stated was that the event transpired during the reign of David. As the writer would reveal, the **famine** happened as God's **punishment** for an unresolved sin of Saul's.

- “Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel...” (**24:1**). All the writer stated was that this happened “again,” and most probably this means that the case of the census did happen after the case with the Gibeonites. And this second event would be **punished** with **plagues**.

For easier comparison, I have summarized the similarities of the two events in the table below:

	<b>Sin of the House of Saul (2 Sam 21)</b>	<b>Sin of the House of David (2 Sam 24)</b>
<b>Whose sin</b>	Saul’s	David’s
<b>Nature of the sin</b>	Unknown Unresolved	Subtle Intentional
<b>Punished with</b>	Famine	Plague (chosen between famine, Plague or Defeat)
<b>Duration</b>	3 years	3 days
<b>Solution</b>	Restitution	Sacrifice
<b>Conclusion</b>	“After that God answered the prayer in behalf of the land” <b>(2 Sam 21:14)</b>	“Then the Lord answered prayer in behalf of the land” ( <b>2 Sam 24:25</b> )

### **Sin of the House of Saul**

In 2 Samuel 21, Israel faced a severe famine for no apparent reason. It could have happened out of natural causes, but for it to happen successively for three years in a land God had promised to bless continually was somewhat of a question. And so David inquired of God, and it was revealed to him that the famine was in fact God’s punishment for what Saul had previously done, which was attempting to destroy the Gibeonites despite the oath taken against doing so (**Jos 9**).

Now, to most of us this would sound really strange. Why is David and Israel paying for a sin of a deceased king? And why punish them for a sin they were not aware of?

The Bible reveals God as the holy God who cannot and will not tolerate evil; and in such holiness, sinners who thus approach Him will be consumed. Therefore, dealing with sin is a non-negotiable matter. It is with this understanding that we should approach the seemingly numerous sacrifices listed in the Book of Leviticus – they provide for us sinners the God-given means to approach the Most Holy God. And as the writer of Hebrews observed, “*the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*” (**Heb 9:22**). Of course, this is a foreshadowing of the perfect sacrifice that Christ would offer. The sacrifices include a sin offering for unintentional and unknown sins (eg. **Lev 4**). This means that even sins that are done ignorantly must be atoned for, and 2 Sam 21 was the account of this restitution. And when that unintentional sin had been dealt with, “*after that God answered the prayer in behalf of the land*” (**21:14**).

### **Sin of the House of David**

Now, in 2 Sam 24, we see initially a very bizarre happening. It reads, “*again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He incited David against them, saying, ‘go and take a census of Israel and Judah.’*” (**24:1**). Now, the verse very clearly stated that it was the Lord who incited David to conduct a census. But

when David did take census, he felt conscience-stricken and confessed that he sinned. What was stranger still was that God admitted that David had sinned, and punished the nation for it.

Another account of this very event can be found in 1 Chr 21, and the striking difference is that herein, we are told that it was **Satan** who incited David to take the census, not God. How do we reconcile the differences?

Well, by now, we have discussed a lot of similar difficulties, so the answer may not be so foreign. The Bible is fileld with many such examples. Did Pharaoh harden his own heart (eg. **Ex 8:15; 8:32**), or did God harden his heart (eg. **Ex 9:12; 10:28**)<sup>ii</sup>? Was Satan the cause of Job's misery, or was it God? And on a similar note, was Satan the cause of Paul's suffering, or was it God (ref **2 Cor 12:7**)?

The answer can be found in the typical framework of **Gen 50:20** when Joseph said to his brothers, "*you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*" The principles revealed herein are therefore: ① That God is the **first cause** of every event; and that everything happened within the scope of His **sovereignty**; that our own sinful will, or even Satan are not God's co-equal but rather are subordinate to His **allowance**. ② That we are **responsible** for our sins, as we intended it for evil and to disobey God. But also that God's sovereignty is **not an excuse** for our failures. ③ That the omniscient God uses even our failures and our failing to **work all things for the good** of all who love Him and who have been called according to His purpose (**Rom 8:29**). And thus, whatever man intended for evil, God pre-designed for the ultimate good.

In explaining things this way, we can confess along with James that God is never the source of evil, but only good (**Jas 1:13-18**).

In a similar tone, 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 need not be seen as being contradictve; but rather complementary. In initially keeping the mystery of David's subtle sin, the writer did not reveal the tempter at work, and arguably intentionally made the story less vivid in order to build he mood<sup>iii</sup>. But when the Second Book of Chronicles was later written, it served another purpose, and therefore Satan as the adversary was later revealed.

Okay, but what was David's sin, really? It wasn't like censuses was a sin, or that it was never done before. In fact, the whole Book of Numbers was about a census ordered by God Himself, was it not? So censuses is not a sin in and of itself. But there are two things to note with its regards.

- 1) **Exodus 30:12** gave a rule regarding censuses. When a census is done, each one must pay the Lord a ransom for his life, as an acknowledgement of God's atoning work in their lives. When they fail to do this, a plague would come upon them. To give such deliberate rule for conducting censuses must mean that there was a danger to the activity.
- 2) **Motivation.** And I think the danger was with regards to the motivation behind it. Half a shekel was to be given in acknowledgement of God's atonement of the people; therefore when each one give the insignificant amount, they confess (affordably) that they were in fact a people who had been purchased by God, and therefore belonged to God entirely. As opposed to the other nations, the poeple did not belongn to the kings or the governors.

David's instruction for census reeked of a self-reliant motivation. Perhaps after such a tiresome life of having to run from his enemies, of facing rebellions from the people closest to him, from being exiled so many times, David wanted to find out if all that he had done amounted for something. And this atmosphere may have been picked up by Joab, which was why he said, "*May the Lord your God multiply the troops a hundred times over, and may the eyes of my lord the king see it. But why does my lord the king want to do such a thing?*" (24:3). Joab kind of knew that David had wanted to see where his power had brought him, and he wished for David's power to be multiplied, and for him to live to see it. And his next sentence as revealed in further detail in **2 Chr 21:3** said this "*why does my lord want to do this? Why should he bring guilt on Israel?*" In other words, why should you insist on what you want if you know that it will bring guilt on Israel?

So, it was quite clear that David sinned, and that it was his own desire, perhaps spurred on by Satan's temptation that drove him to desire the census. He might have felt insecure about the fact that after reigning for so long, Israel was no better than they were before; that they were still continually displeasing the Lord, and causing his anger to come upon them. After all, that was the very introduction of **s Samuel 24**, that God was again angry at Israel. He might have wanted to find a little reassurance that his work mattered, that he had actually seen progress, and that the promise of God had been achieved through him. This was important for someone who worked hard all his life; he needed to know if his work had achieved something, and was not merely vanity.

### The Chiastic Climax

Now, it would seem that ending **2 Samuel** with chapter 24 was a bit of a sour ending. Sure enough, David repented of his sin, and finally God heard his prayer and Israel was restored. But would it not seem like a hopeless cycle of sin and repentance?

But studying **2 Samuel 15-24** made me realize the possibility of a Chiastic structure there; which would look something like this:

### The Chiastic Structure of **2 Samuel 15 – 24**

- A) **21:1-14**      The Sin of the House of Saul
- B) **21:15-22**      David's mighty Warriors
- C) **22:1-23:7**      David's Song of Praise & Last Oracle
- B') **23:8-39**      David's mighty Warriors
- A') **24:1-25**      The Sin of the House of David

As I have mentioned, chapters 21and 24 seemed to make it clear that they were not meant to be a chronological retelling of the stories. But so is chapter 22, which "interrupted" us with David's song of praise, and also his last oracle as recorded in **22:1-23:7**. Why I say "interrupted" is because this verse is once again not placed chronologically. The context was "*when the Lord delivered David from all his enemies and from the hand of Saul*" (22:1). Now the event before may qualify as the time when God delivered David from his

enemies; although the context does not present enough distress to warrant such description. But even further than that, how does the situation fit into God delivering David from the hands of Saul? That was way before!

So the chiastic structure matches:

A) *The sin of the house of Saul*      With      A') *The sin of the house of David*

And also matches

B) *David's mighty men*      With      B') *David's mighty men*

And at its climax, which takes the utmost importance is C) *David's song of praise and last oracle*. At this point, David was retelling of the story of his life; and it did not matter at which chronological point it was (probably David sang the son more than once in his life). It was a song which tells of God's mighty providence for his life; of how God protected David from all his deadly enemies and gave him numerous improbable victories. It was a recounting of the times when God rescued David from certain death; lifting him up from dire situations. It was a confession of how David had, with God's help and grace, kept himself pure. And finally in his last oracle, David confessed that his House was right with God because God had made with him and everlasting covenant (**23:5**), and that covenant was the guarantee that David's salvation would come into fruition (**23:6**), not because of David's faithfulness, but because of God's.

And that, my dear friends, is the story of David's life. Not an infallible or faultless man which we wanted; but a man after God's own heart nonetheless. A man who was quick to identify his own sins when confronted to him; and also a man who was quick to forgive the sins others committed to him. A man who had lusted after some wrong things, but was quick to renounce them when they were identified as sin. And this was because, above all else, his desire was for God. His story of faithfulness was really founded upon the faithfulness of God.

### **The Foreshadow**

One other thing struck me; and I think this would be the fitting way to end the study. David's census had caused him a punishment of plagues. Now the reason he chose this was because he would rather fall into the hands of God than to the hands of the enemies, because he was confident of God's mercy (**24:14**). Harsh though it might be, God's discipline was still a token of His love. This took out one of the three options, which was defeat (and flight) from his enemies. Famine was probably taken out because Israel had already been through that for the sin of the house of Saul. And so David chose the plague, which was indeed the proper punishment for failing to conduct a proper census (**Ex 30:12**).

The plague, however, was very severe and it killed seventy thousand people (**24:15**). But when the angel of God came to the threshing floor of Araunah, we are told that the Lord was grieved (or literally, relented or repented) because of the calamity and stayed the hand of the angel (**24:16**). And notice that it was God who stopped first, before David then prayed in **24:17**; proving once again that the grace of God always precedes human response.

However, what was of the utmost interest was that the place where God then relented from the calamity was stated very clearly; and in order for God's justice to be fulfilled that day, David was commanded to build an altar to the Lord at that very place (**24:18**). This tells me a few things:

1. That despite God's relenting from the calamity, and despite David's grief and repentance, restoration was not given until the altar was built and the sacrifice of sin offered in the way God instructed. God's

love and justice does not contradict – it goes hand in hand. Even when God dispenses His loving kindness, He ensures it is done in a way that would not violate His justice. And even when God executes His judgment against the sin of David, He would surely remember mercy.

2. God stopped at the threshing floor of Araunah. Why there? In **2 Chr 3:1-2** we are even told that Solomon would later build the Temple of God at that very place. Why the significance of that threshing place? Well, one of the reasons, I think is what had once transpired at that place. **2 Chr 3:1** stated that the threshing place was in fact on Mount Moriah. Do you find the place familiar? Well, according to **Gen 22:2**, Mount Moriah was the place Abraham took Isaac to be sacrificed to the Lord. If you want to draw another parallel, Christ was later crucified at its vicinity also. God stopped at the very place where Abraham once faithfully showed his ultimate faith and obedience. Was it a coincidence? And God provided a sacrifice in place of Isaac that day, and would do the same with David this very time. Isaac should have died that day. David should have died also. In fact, Abraham and all the Israelites should have also died because of their sins. But the hand that stayed required another that slew the animal sacrifices. And this would speak of the propitiating sacrifice that Christ would later bring to this very place in Jerusalem. Isaac was saved that day by the shadow of Christ's sacrifice. David and the Israelites were saved by the very same shadow. We are now saved by the reality of the sacrifice that Christ did on the Cross, when He took your sins and my sins; whether known or otherwise; and pronounce atonement for us.

What wonderful lessons God had taught David near the end of his reign. When David felt insecure about his own achievements, God reminded him that it was not David's faithfulness that mattered, it was God's faithfulness to His covenant. It wasn't David who was going to accomplish the promise, it was God. And God would bring this plan of salvation into fruition in the person of Jesus Christ, the promised descendant of David. He would succeed where all others (including David) failed.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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<sup>i</sup> The Spirit of the Reformation Stud Bible. Footnote on 20:1.

<sup>ii</sup> We addressed this question in Exodus (2) Pharaoh and Egypt. Refer to that document for the answer

<sup>iii</sup> For example, **2 Chr 21** defined it more clearly that Joab thought the command was repulsive (**21:6**) and that what David had done was evil in the sight of God (**21:7**).