David Numbers Israel
2 Samuel 24:1-4; 8-25

A couple of weeks back we watched a film and the ending was terrible. And with 12 minutes to go to the end we were sat there wondering how they were going to turn things around and how the good were going to triumph. And then we realised that there were probably going to be at least 4 minutes of credits, which meant they only had 8 minutes to make things come right. But they didn't! It was terrible.

And today we're going to finish 2 Samuel. And at first sight this story seems a terrible way to end the book, because it seems like David has failed again. But what I hope we're going to see is it's the very opposite of terrible!

Reading 2 Samuel 24:1-4; 8-25

Counting on the Wrong Things
Look at v1: 'Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah."' And in one verse the writer tells us two things that can leave us 21st Century types feeling distinctly uncomfortable. Firstly, God gets angry - and the idea that God's a God of wrath, who gets angry at sin, is not exactly popular, is it? In fact, we're told it's primitive and we know better now than to think of God like that.

And secondly, God incites David to do something and then punishes him for it. And if I did that with my kids they'd be in uproar. So that's not just primitive, it's just plain wrong, we think.

And, look what he punished him for. I mean, if you're going to get hot under the collar, and angry about something, then surely there are better things to get angry about than David asking those number crunching civil servants down at the Office of National Statistics to conduct a census!

Ok, let's look at those in reverse order.

Why is David numbering Israel wrong? Only this week I had to fill in the on-line Swiss national census. And sure it was a pain to do, but it's not exactly something to get emotional about, is it?

And yet, David does. Look what Joab says in v3, "Why does my Lord the king *delight* in this?" Now, what does it mean to delight in something? It means you really want to do this this thing, because you know it's going to make you feel happier, better, more alive, more confident on the inside. And so, for David, this head-counting isn't just a dull but necessary task to help national planning, he *delights* in it. Knowing the size of his army brings him joy and pleasure and a skip in his step.

Why? Because this *is* about the size of the army, isn't it? And after 9 months of data gathering Joab's back with the results: v9, 'In Israel there were 800,000 valiant men *who drew the sword*, and the men of Judah were 500,000.' Ok, so this was about David knowing the number of men he could call on to fight for him.

Now, why does the thought of knowing that number delight David? Because the size of his army is something to take pride in, isn't it? 'These are the men under my command!' It's something to find confidence in and security from: 'no one can touch us with an army this size.' When he knows the number of men he can call on he feels safe.

Or, maybe this was about the number of men in the land that would determine the amount of taxes he could raise, the size of the revenue coming his way. 'And think what we could do with that money!'

You see, we delight in those things that make us feel good about ourselves, or make us feel life is good, that we're doing ok, that we're on top, that we're safe. And even Joab, the calculating military man, can see that there's just a bit too much emotion going into David's decision.

In the Psalm 20, David wrote,'Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.' Some delight, some put their hope in the size of their armed forces, but not us! We find those things in God. But David's wobbled, because men and money are way more tangible than God.

But something else might be going on here as well. You see, Exodus 30:11-12 says, 'The Lord said to Moses, "When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the Lord when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them."' Now, remember when David moved the ark, and how he'd grown just a bit sloppy and failed to follow the law in handling the ark? Well, given that here there's no mention of them collecting the ransom price for each man, to be given over to God, maybe David's done the same again. Maybe he's forgotten that every man in Israel belongs to God, not to him.

But, whatever the reason, it's clear that this was much less a problem with those civil servants down at the Office of National Statistics and much more a problem with the king's heart. Because, at this moment in his life, David's finding his sense of inner wellbeing somewhere other than God. And when you do that, it can negatively affect your decision making and cloud your judgment, can't it?

So… what are those things for you? What are those things in your life that when you have them, or don't have them, they make you just a bit too emotional? It could be stuff to do with your career, or how other people speak of you. It could be some romantic relationship, or the amount of money in the bank, or how your investments are doing, or how things are going with your marriage or kids. And you're happy, over-the-top happy, just a bit high, if that thing is looking good, but you're anxious and down if it's not.

And it's not that these things are bad or that God doesn't want you to know joy and delight and deep inner wellbeing. He does! It's that he wants you to find that in something that will never let you down and can never be taken away from you. And you'll only ever find that in him. Find it anywhere else and your emotional state will be up and down, and you'll make bad decisions, and most importantly of all, you'll dishonour him. But, when it is him, you'll know a joy and a peace that rises above your circumsance, and rather than clouding your judgement, you'll see life with crystal clarity, and in the process, you'll be honouring him.

Well, sure, you might say, but how can God stir up David to do this and then hold him guilty for it? I mean, that would be like me telling one of you to do something for set-down and then beating you with a stick for doing it. Well, look what the writer actually says in v1, 'The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.' So as a nation, Israel is behaving in ways that anger God. And God is going to use David's sin to bring Israel's sin out into the open and deal with it.

And think how this works in a court of law. Imagine someone has committed multiple counts of theft, and it's impossible to prosecute them for them all. So the prosecution brings a specimen charge, a sample case, and says, this is what's been going on.

And that's what God's doing. At this moment, David finds his security and happiness, he's trusting in the size of his army and not in God. And that dishonours God and puts the nation at risk. But that's just an example of what the whole nation is doing. And maybe they're prospering under David's reign, and all those indices of a good life are going up, but as theyve gone up, maybe their joy and hope for the future, their sense of safety, and pride is increasingly based on things other than God. And they've exchanged God for idols.

And yet, in 1 Chronicles 21 there's a parallel account to this one, and it gives us another perspective on what's going on here. Look what it says, 'Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.' Now, is that a contradiction? 2 Samuel says it was God and 1 Chronicles says it was satan. And the answer's, No! The Bible writers can probably tell the difference between God and his greatest enemy. But 1 Chronicles tells us is that satan wants to destroy God's people, and he goes for the king to achieve it. But 2 Samuel tells us that all of that was in God's control, and what satan meant for evil God turns and uses for his purposes.

And, if you think about it, that should make your hearts sing. Because bad stuff happens to you, and it might be because of your sin, or others' sins against you, or just the circumstances of life, and you can think, 'man, this this is out of control!' But it's not out of control. No ill intended against you, no harsh words spoken to you, no failure on your part, or sin on anyone else's, can derail God's loving plans for your life. Everything and every one is under his sovereign control. As Paul writes in Romans 8:28, 'We know that for those who love God all things work together for good.'

Ok, but why anger? You, or a friend, might say, 'I don't want a God of wrath, that's not the god I want to worship.' But it is, isn't it? I mean, when you look at injustice in the world, or you see someone getting away with something that you know is just plain wrong and justice isn't being done, don't you feel just a little bit angry about it? You see, in reality we do want a God of justice, who punishes evil and makes wrongs right. We want a God who feels the injustice and anger we feel towards sin and those who commit it. We just don't want that anger directed at us. And we want it to be us who determine what sin is.

And yet David comes to realise that what he'd done deserved God's anger, that he was morally responsible for his actions. But rather than that turn him away from God, it turns him back.

In God's Hands

Look at v10: '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."'

So David's conscience pricks him and he knows that what he's done is wrong, and he's humble enough, and courageous enough, to name it as sin. And that's striking isn't it? Because think how else he might have responded? Think how you or I are tempted to respond when our consciences prick us?

We can ignore it. We know what we've done is wrong, but we choose not to listen to it. Or, we can actively squash it, by shifting the blame: 'I wouldn't have behaved like that if he or she didn't do this or that.' Or, we can try and excuse our actions and come up with reasons why they're not so bad after all. But David doesn't. He confesses his sin and pleads with God to take his guiltiness away.

And yet, the fact that David listens to his heart is hardly revolutionary, is it? I mean you could almost make 'listen to your heart' the mantra for our culture: be true to yourself, listen to your inner voice. But what is revolutionary is that he listens to that voice when it tells him he's sinned, and that he listens to others who tell him the same.

Verse 11, 'The word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, Go and say to David…' And David, the man who failed to listen to Joab, now listens to his friend who has some hard things to tell him. And Proverbs tells us that's how real wisdom comes. It's not by only listening to those who agree with you, but by listening to people who see things differently from you. And David doesn't respond to Gad by saying, 'don't you come in here with all that talk about sin and judgement.' He humbles himself and accepts that what Gad has to say is what God has to say.

And Gad gives David three options. Verse 13, "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?" And David chooses to throw himself upon the Lord's mercy. Verse 14, "Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man."

David would rather trust himself to God than to man, because he knows that whilst God is a God of wrath, he's also a God of love, a God great in mercy. And so, v15, 'the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel… And there died 70,000 men.' So what started as a head count ends up as a body count.

It's tragic, isn't it? Get the thing that we find our ultimate joy and security in wrong, honour the wrong thing by finding in it your safety or hope for the future, and the outcome can be anything but the joy and security we're looking for. It just does us and others harm. And yet, sometimes, it takes that experience, of finding this other thing wanting, to bring us back to God as the ultimate source of every good thing we're looking for.

But, if that's God's judgement, where's his mercy? Because whilst a God of wrath might inspire our fear, if you're to find your joy and security in him, you need to know something other than that, don't you? You need to know his love and forgiveness and grace. You need to know he's better than anything else on offer.

The Place of Sacrifice

So, just as the plague is about to hit Jerusalem - in the words of the writer in v16, 'when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it' - the Lord tells him, "It is enough; now stay your hand." And 1 Chronicles tells us that David sees the angel by the threshing floor of Araunah, with his sword drawn over the city.

And David intercedes for the people. And in response God tells him to build an altar on the threshing floor. Verse 25, 'And David built there an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings and

peace offerings. So the Lord responded to the pleas for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.'

So, the angel could lower his sword, God's wrath was finally turned aside; to use the theological term, God's wrath was propitiated, as these sacrifices were made, and animals died in the place of the people.

And it all happened at the threshing floor of Araunah. Do you know the significance of that place?

Where the angel now stood with sword raised, centuries earlier Abraham had stood with knife raised (2 Chron 3:1), ready to sacrifice his son Isaac. On this same spot. And the Lord had told Abraham - 'hold your hand!' And as Abraham looked up, there was a ram, caught in the thorns, which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son. And David bought this land, and Solomon built the temple on it - and it became *the* place of substitutionary sacrifice.

And yet, animal sacrifices can never be enough, can they? Because ultimately, there is no moral equivalence between David, and Israel, or you and I sinning against an infinitely holy and just God by dishonouring him, and an animal. And David knows that he, and you and I, need something that takes away our sin, that doesn't just turn away God's wrath temporarily, but does so for ever, and washes us clean of our guilt, so that instead of living in fear of punishment we could stand under the waterfall of his love. And if we had that, we wouldn't need to look around for anything else to fill our hearts in that ultimate kind of way.

Well, look again at David's prayer: Verse 17, "Behold, I have sinned… But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father's house." And David the shepherd boy has become David, the shepherd king, and he's offering himself as their sacrifice. He's asking that God's hand, that outstretched sword of the angel, fall upon him. The problem is, he can't be that sacrifice - because he himself is tainted by sin.

But David's prayer echoes down the centuries: they're the sheep, I'm the shepherd; let your wrath fall upon me, on my family. And the hand of God does fall upon one of his descendants, as Lord Jesus, David's greatest son, stands up and says, 'I'm the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. Let your hand fall upon me.' And Abraham was told to lower his hand, and a ram took Isaac's place; and here, the angel is told to lower his hand and burnt offerings take the people's place. But at the cross, the hand of God the Father was raised - and this time it did fall, this time the Son wasn't spared, this time there was no substitute, because he *was* the substitute. And Jesus willingly took all of God's anger against our sin upon himself, and absorbed it. As God's own Son took our place, as God made him, as Paul says in Romans 3:25, 'a propitiation by his blood'.

But did you notice how David refused to take up Araunah's offer to have the land and animals for nothing? Verse 24, "I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing." Atoning for sin is always costly. So costly you and I could never do it. And so at the cross God paid the infinite price, the death of his beloved Son, so that you and I might live and stand before him loved and accepted - washed clean, and guiltless in his sight.

You see, how do you try and deal with your guilt? Do you try and self-atone? Maybe by hating your self, and self-loathing; or maybe by trying to outdo your bad with good. But listen, you don't need to! Christ has done it. God is not angry with you anymore. He loves you. You guilt is gone, your

sins are paid for. The sword of wrath is not hanging over your head, it fell on Christ, because he loved you so much he died for you. And now, for you, if you're a Christian, all there is is the Father's outstretched hand, inviting you, come and find the joy and the security you're searching for.

And as we finish - one last thought. Who crucified Christ? Who engineered the death of the Son of the God? The Bible is clear, that just as here Satan incited David, so the cross was the work of evil men and the power of darkness. But it's also clear that, just as here God was in sovereign control of everything, so the cross was always God's plan. What satan meant for evil, God meant for good - for David and for you.

Understand that, and you'll fear God with a right fear, but you'll also love him, because you know he loves you first, with an infinitely costly love.