



At Magdalen Road this week we hit a difficult passage in Chronicles as we hit chapter 21. At the start we acknowledged how this passage raises (at least!) 5 problems for (mostly) Western ears like ours!

1. The first issues is that Satan rose up against Israel. Thats a problem as we probably struggle (at least in practice) to believe in Satan, but also because in 2 Sam 24 it was God who 'incited' David to undertake a census. How can we square that circle?!
2. Secondly we noted the issue of why it actually matters whether David undertook a census or not.
3. Thirdly how do we deal with the fact that God actually punishes and disciplines his own people.
4. How can God's people then be punished for David's actions. How can that be fair!?
5. Almost like an inconsistent parent then God relents half-way through, changing his mind almost. How does that work for a God who's all-knowing and all-powerful?

We said that a big part of the problem that we have with passages like this is that we've possibly shaped God into our image. We must not shape God into our image, and we must not let our culture shape him into it's own image. It was the author Tim Keller who said If your god never disagrees with you, you might just be worshipping an idealized version of yourself.

#### v1-7: Sin

Satan appears only 3 times in the Old Testament (Job 1, Zech 3 and here), elsewhere he's the accuser, whilst here he's an 'insighter'. The passage doesn't tell us explicitly what's wrong with David taking a census (though his nephew and army commander Joab is sure it's wrong from the beginning). The most likely answer is that it's David doing things and trusting in his own strength. This is a problem of pride - particularly perhaps pride in his own achievements and the numbers of his army. Our danger can be a pride where we trust in our strength of numbers, rather than in God.

As we seek to wrestle with the idea of Satan inciting David to take the census, Job 1 is perhaps the most helpful cross-reference for us to consider. In Job we see the idea of Satan being active and yet limited by the sovereignty of God. Well so it is that the Chronicler can say that Satan incited, whilst the author of Samuel can say that God did it (for he did in his permissive will). "Behind and above the spiritual agent of evil, God reigns" as one commentator puts it.

#### v8: Sorry

David refreshingly does NOT point the finger onto anyone else as he repents, but rather accepts his culpability and guilt. It is profoundly human to not only err but also to attempt to try to avoid the blame! We noted how repentance is a key daily discipline of the Christian life, not seeking to short the blame but rather each day to come before the Lord and repent. Its through that process that we grow in maturity as believers as we see that sin is profoundly relational, and we see how amazing God's love for us in Christ is and how the gospel is enough. As Martin Luther began his 95 Theses: ""Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

God does not simply forgive and forget at this point though, there are consequences for David's sin:

#### v9-15: Suffering

David, as the leader and representative of his people, is given the choice of punishment and chooses to fall into the hands of God, due to his mercy (v13). 70,000 men die. Note the irony at this point as David began the chapter seeking to count his troops. The punishment fits the crime. God deliberately takes some of his troops away. God loves to humble us and put us in positions where we have to trust him. Again and again through the scriptures, when God's people are walking with him, despite their size they defeat larger armies. God's 'relenting' in this matter is a concern for some. The most helpful shape I find though to understand this dynamic through the scriptures, is that God's threat and warning of judgment are contingent upon the role of the mediator. It's as if God is parent saying to their children that they will punish them, they then say sorry and some of that punishment is mitigated. More information for those interested in this topic and different types of prophecy are in the footnote below<sup>1</sup>

#### v16-19: Substitution

The passage ends with David extraordinarily offering to take the punishment himself (or his family) rather than his people. We snuck a look at v24 and saw too that David grasps something of the cost that is needed to deal with sin. Rather than allowing him to do this David is commanded to construct an altar which will in time become the foundation for the actual temple. God provides atonement for the sin of his people and so for the parties to be reconciled.

We finished our time together considering Jesus' atoning sacrifice in Hebrews 10. He will be the true 'once and for all' sacrifice for his people.

Here are a few questions to start your group off...

- why do you think David wanted to perform a census? Why was Joab reluctant?
- how does David model repentance for us in v8? Why is it so hard for us to repent? How can we get better at it as a daily discipline?
- do you think it's fair that David's sin leads to the loss of life? Why is this hard for us to understand and accept in our culture?
- What do you make of God 'relenting'? How does that inspire us to pray and live?
- How does God provide atonement for the people? What does this ultimately point us to?

<sup>1</sup> [https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted\\_hildebrandt/OTeSources/02-Exodus/Text/Articles/Chisholm-ChangeMind-BSac.htm](https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/OTeSources/02-Exodus/Text/Articles/Chisholm-ChangeMind-BSac.htm)