

David's Sacrifice

Devotional Reading: 2 Peter 3:11–18

Background Scripture: 1 Chronicles 21:1–22:1

1 Chronicles 21:14–30

14 So the LORD sent pestilence upon Israel: and there fell of Israel seventy thousand men.

15 And God sent an angel unto Jerusalem to destroy it: and as he was destroying, the LORD beheld, and he repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed, It is enough, stay now thine hand. And the angel of the LORD stood by the threshingfloor of Ornan the Jebusite.

16 And David lifted up his eyes, and saw the angel of the LORD stand between the earth and the heaven, having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders of Israel, who were clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces.

17 And David said unto God, Is it not I that commanded the people to be numbered? even I it is that have sinned and done evil indeed; but as for these sheep, what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, O LORD my God, be on me, and on my father's house; but not on thy people, that they should be plagued.

18 Then the angel of the LORD commanded Gad to say to David, that David should go up, and set up an altar unto the LORD in the threshingfloor of Ornan the Jebusite.

19 And David went up at the saying of Gad, which he spake in the name of the LORD.

20 And Ornan turned back, and saw the angel; and his four sons with him hid themselves. Now Ornan was threshing wheat.

21 And as David came to Ornan, Ornan looked and saw David, and went out of the threshingfloor, and bowed himself to David with his face to the ground.

22 Then David said to Ornan, Grant me the place of this threshingfloor, that I may build an altar therein unto the LORD: thou shalt grant it me for the full price: that the plague may be stayed from the people.

23 And Ornan said unto David, take it to thee, and let my lord the king do that which is good in his eyes: lo, I give thee the oxen also for burnt offerings, and the threshing instruments for wood, and the wheat for the meat offering; I give it all.

24 And king David said to Ornan, Nay; but I will verily buy it for the full price: for I will not take that which is thine for the LORD, nor offer burnt offerings without cost.

25 So David gave to Ornan for the place six hundred shekels of gold by weight.

26 And David built there an altar unto the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, and called upon the LORD; and he answered him from heaven by fire upon the altar of burnt offering.

27 And the LORD commanded the angel; and he put up his sword again into the sheath thereof.

28 At that time when David saw that the LORD had answered him in the threshingfloor of Ornan the Jebusite, then he sacrificed there.

29 For the tabernacle of the LORD, which Moses made in the wilderness, and the altar of the burnt offering, were at that season in the high place at Gibeon.

30 But David could not go before it to inquire of God: for he was afraid because of the sword of the angel of the LORD.

Key Text

King David said to Ornan, nay; but I will verily buy it for the full price: for I will not take that which is thine for the Lord, nor offer burnt offerings without cost.—1 Chronicles 21:24

Costly Sacrifices

Unit 3: Special Offerings and the Sanctuary

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Specify what David accepted responsibility for.
2. Explain why David insisted on paying for what was offered to him as a gift.
3. Write an intercessory prayer on behalf of his or her community.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Plagues and Punishment
- B. Lesson Context

I. The Destroying Angel (1 Chronicles 21:14–17)

- A. Terrible Judgment (v. 14)
Disaster Brings Change
- B. Divine Peril (vv. 15–16a)
- C. Passionate Plea (vv. 16b–17)

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- A. Prophetic Directive (vv. 18–19)
- B. Humble Cooperation (vv. 20–25)
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- C. Sheathed Sword (vv. 26–27)

III. The Sword of the Lord (1 Chronicles 21:28–30)

- A. Ancient Tabernacle (vv. 28–29)
- B. Fearful Caution (v. 30)

Conclusion

- A. Community Suffering
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

AraunahA-raw-nuh.

BathshebaBath-she-buh.

JebusitesJeb-yuh-sites.

OrnanOr-nawn.

UriahYu-rye-uh.

Introduction

A. Plagues and Punishment

In the fourteenth century, the Black Death (bubonic plague) came to Europe and caused sudden, widespread fatalities. A common estimate is that one-third of the people of Europe died within five years. Since the science of the time could not explain the plague, many people believed the disease to be God's punishment for the corrupt lifestyles of Christians and the church's tolerance of sin. This belief often led to persecution of perceived heretics.

More recently, widespread outbreaks of viral disease—the 1918 Great Influenza pandemic, the 1980s AIDS epidemic, and the COVID-19 pandemic of the 2020s—have been perceived by some as punishments by God for societal sins. Those who saw these health crises that way proclaimed justification from Scripture.

Well-known are the 10 plagues inflicted on the people of Egypt (Exodus 7:14–11:10). But most, if not all, of these don't fit our usual understanding of the word *plague* as referring to a disease resulting from a bacterial or viral infection. In today's lesson, a plague sent as God's punishment takes place during the reign of Israel's greatest ruler, King David.

B. Lesson Context

Despite being portrayed as “a man after [God's] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22), King David committed grievous sins. Most remembered are the sins of adultery and murder in his seduction of Bathsheba and the death of her husband, Uriah (2 Samuel 11). The “God's own heart” part of David seems to have gained traction after he was confronted by the prophet Nathan about the violation of the sixth and seventh commandments (Exodus 20:13–14). The result was the tender prayer of Psalm 51:10, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.”

More consequential for a greater number of people, however, was the sin of David concerning a census he took of Israel to know the potential size of his army (2 Samuel 24:2; 1 Chronicles 21:2). The results of the survey must have astonished David: there were over one million men who “drew the sword” (2 Samuel 24:9). This census angered the Lord, for David’s pride drove it as he rejected his reliance upon God for Israel’s security.

The prophet Gad delivered God’s judgment to David, and it came with a twist: David could choose from among three punishments, of varying impacts on Israel, for his sins. The choices were three years of famine, three months of attacks by the nation’s enemies, or three days of a pestilent plague (1 Chronicles 21:12). These three had been ways the Lord showed His wrath to Israel (see Jeremiah 14:12). David chose the third option, with horrific results for his people.

I. The Destroying Angel **(1 Chronicles 21:14–17)**

A. Terrible Judgment (v. 14)

14. So the LORD sent pestilence upon Israel: and there fell of Israel seventy thousand men.

The *pestilence* the Lord delivered *upon Israel* was labeled earlier as the “sword of the Lord” (1 Chronicles 21:12). Although not described, the implication is that of a fast-moving malady that kills quickly. The parallel passage, 2 Samuel 24:15, notes the plague’s reach “from Dan even to Beersheba”—a straight-line distance of about 150 miles, encompassing the whole of Israel. In the small geographic footprint of David’s realm, every village and every citizen would have felt loss because of these deaths. The sorrowful outcry from survivors would have been deafening and impossible for the king to ignore.

Disaster Brings Change

The Bible explains how God used floods, plagues, locusts, and invading armies to express His displeasure with sinful people. But He wasn’t expressing His anger merely to “blow off steam”; instead, He was instigating change—from sinful behavior to godly behavior.

When disasters have happened since the first century AD, some people will attribute it to God’s wrath (see the Introduction to this lesson). But invariably, this is just speculation. We don’t know if a given disaster today is actually a divine punishment or simply an event that God allows to occur. But we do know that change follows disasters. Just think of the societal changes since the COVID-19 pandemic.

When we face personal disaster, we might worry that God is punishing us. It’s more valuable, however, to focus on what change will follow. Remember the example of Job, who lost everything through no fault of his own while remaining faithful. God is more than able to bless us in the aftermath with even more than we lost (Job 42:12).

—A. W.

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to someone who thinks that disasters are God’s judgment for sin?

Digging Deeper

How might your response differ regarding a sick person who thinks God is punishing him?

or her?

B. Divine Peril (vv. 15–16a)

15a. And God sent an angel unto Jerusalem to destroy it: and as he was destroying, the LORD beheld, and he repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed, It is enough, stay now thine hand.

This half-verse reveals the time has come for Jerusalem to experience God's anger as *an angel* of death appears on the scene. It's unfitting to take the word *destroy* in the sense of "demolishing buildings" since the parallel in 2 Samuel 24:16 establishes that the focus is on the people themselves.

Before completing this devastation, however, the Lord *repented him of the evil*. This phrasing doesn't mean that God had been doing something wrong or sinful—that would be impossible. Instead, to "repent" means God changed the course of what was anticipated to happen next. The word *evil* in this context doesn't refer to a moral evil but to the due punishment.

15b. And the angel of the LORD stood by the threshingfloor of Ornan the Jebusite.

A threshing floor was a flat, hard piece of ground, ideally one of stone. Every harvest, the dried bundles of grain would be threshed here.

This process involved laying the grain out and having it beaten or trampled by oxen to separate the ripened seeds from the stalks. The process also involved winnowing (compare Ruth 3:2; note figurative use in Luke 3:17). When the process was complete, grains could be ground into flour for making bread. A threshing floor was thus an essential piece of food production that could last from harvest to harvest. Threshing floors are mentioned dozens of times in the Bible, sometimes figuratively (examples: Deuteronomy 25:4; Isaiah 28:27; 1 Corinthians 9:9).

The fact that a *Jebusite* owned this *threshingfloor* is revealing. Jebusites are mentioned over 40 times in the Old Testament. They were not Israelites (1 Kings 9:20; 2 Chronicles 8:7); rather, they were one of the tribes inhabiting the promised land that the Israelites were commanded to drive out. They had lived in Jerusalem and, apparently, David let some of them stay after he conquered the city (2 Samuel 5:6–8). Ornan's presence after David's takeover indicates he had favor with the Israelite conquerors in some way and was perhaps known to David. (Note: 2 Samuel 24:16 uses "Araunah" as a variation of Ornan's name.)

16a. And David lifted up his eyes, and saw the angel of the LORD stand between the earth and the heaven, having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem.

Comparing 1 Chronicles 21:16–17, a segment of our lesson-text, with its parallel section in 2 Samuel 24:17 yields some interesting results. The most obvious difference is one of length: this part of the story is about twice as long in our lesson-text than the version in that parallel verse. That parallel of the half-verse before us now merely says, "David spake unto the Lord when he saw the angel that smote the people."

C. Passionate Plea (vv. 16b–17)

16b. Then David and the elders of Israel, who were clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces.

This scene is absent altogether in the parallel verse of 2 Samuel 24:17. *Sackcloth* is the garment of mourning (examples: 2 Samuel 3:31; Amos 8:10). It is made from rough, loose-fitting cloth—modern burlap may be similar. Sackcloth was the exact opposite of the finery of kings' robes or of the luxurious garments of a nation's leaders (example: Jonah 3:6).

In the verse before us, the wearing of sackcloth is combined with falling prostrate—itself a sign of humility before God or other people (example: Ruth 2:10). The combined aspects of wearing sackcloth and falling facedown are rare in Scripture; this indicates the extreme nature of the situation at hand. The reaction of *David and the elders of Israel* to the angel is submission, not defiance. They surrendered to the judgment of the Lord.

17. And David said unto God, Is it not I that commanded the people to be numbered? even I it is that have sinned and done evil indeed; but as for these sheep, what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, O LORD my God, be on me, and on my father's house; but not on thy people, that they should be plagued.

The parallel in 2 Samuel 24:17 says much the same as the verse at hand but is more succinct. Both stress David's confession that he and he alone was responsible for the unholy census he had taken. His advisor Joab had warned him against doing that and had even left one tribe uncounted. But David quickly rejected Joab's counsel (2 Samuel 24:3–4; 1 Chronicles 21:3–6).

Even so, David seemed quite willing to admit his sin and repent. When God confronted Adam with his sin in the garden, he attempted to shift the blame to his wife, Eve (Genesis 3:12). When Samuel rebuked Saul for disobedience, that king made excuses (1 Samuel 15:13–21). David did neither. As he did when confronted with his sin regarding Bathsheba, David took sole responsibility (2 Samuel 12:13).

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to take responsibility for something wrong you've done?

Digging Deeper

How should your prayers be the same or different from what David prayed?

II. The Fiery Altar (1 Chronicles 21:18–27)

A. Prophetic Directive (vv. 18–19)

18. Then the angel of the LORD commanded Gad to say to David, that David should go up, and set up an altar unto the LORD in the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

The severity of David's sin demanded more than words of repentance and submissive body postures. So *the Lord* made His expectations clear to *David* through the prophet *Gad*. This man is elsewhere referred to as a "prophet" (1 Samuel 22:5), as a "seer" (1 Chronicles 21:9), and as both: "the prophet Gad, David's seer" (2 Samuel 24:11). For David to *go up* means that a bit of an uphill hike was to be part of his overall task. See commentary on 1 Chronicles 21:15b, above, regarding the designation of *the Jebusite*.

19. And David went up at the saying of Gad, which he spake in the name of the LORD.

David realized that *Gad* was not offering his own expert opinion but was speaking *in the name of the Lord*. The phrase *went up at the saying* indicates complete obedience. The Lord had chosen a specific site. As noted in 2 Chronicles 3:1, that place was "mount Moriah, where the Lord appeared unto David ... in the place that David had prepared in the threshingfloor of Ornan the Jebusite." This threshing floor was to become the site of Solomon's temple (1 Chronicles 22:1). Moriah was the place where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac (Genesis 22:2).

B. Humble Cooperation (vv. 20–25)

20–21. And Ornan turned back, and saw the angel; and his four sons with him hid themselves. Now Ornan was threshing wheat. And as David came to Ornan, Ornan looked and saw David, and went out of the threshingfloor, and bowed himself to David with his face to the ground.

This seems to have been a workday for *Ornan*?... *and his four sons*. As they were *threshing wheat*, they perhaps did not notice at first the presence of *the angel*. We can scarcely imagine the shock of turning around and simultaneously seeing both an angel and the king! The parallel passage 2 Samuel 24:20 adds that David was accompanied by servants, adding to the shock.

22. Then David said to Ornan, Grant me the place of this threshingfloor, that I may build an altar therein unto the LORD: thou shalt grant it me for the full price: that the plague may be stayed from the people.

David wasted no time in making known the reason for his visit. He could have "pulled rank" and confiscated Ornan's property, but David offered *the full price*. He intended to carry out the Lord's instructions through *Gad* but with justice and integrity. And if there was any time in David's life when he had to act with unquestionable integrity, this was it, considering the lives that were at stake.

23. And Ornan said unto David, Take it to thee, and let my lord the king do that which is good in his eyes: lo, I give thee the oxen also for burnt offerings, and the threshing instruments for wood, and the wheat for the meat offering; I give it all.

We now see the extent of Ornan's threshing operation. We also gain insight into the person of Ornan himself. Although he is a non-Israelite (see commentary on 1 Chronicles 21:15b, above), he was familiar with Israel's sacrificial system. He knew how *oxen* and *wheat* could be used in differing types of *offerings* (Leviticus 1 and 2; we note that the *King James Version* uses the word *meat* at times to stand for any food, even grain; see Leviticus 2:1, 4). Burnt offerings require wood for fire, and Ornan offered his *threshing instruments* for that purpose.

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to evaluate your generosity?

Digging Deeper

In what ways does 2 Corinthians 9:6–15 convict you in this regard?

24–25. And king David said to Ornan, Nay; but I will verily buy it for the full price: for I will not take that which is thine for the LORD, nor offer burnt offerings without cost. So David gave to Ornan for the place six hundred shekels of gold by weight.

David resisted any urge to use his position to pay anything less than *the full price* to Ornan and his family. The sin at issue was David's, and his repentance was to cost him. Ancient weights found in archaeological digs reveal that a shekel's weight is about 11.34 grams, which converts to 0.365 troy ounces in today's measurements. So the *six hundred shekels of gold by weight* paid by David would have been about 219 troy ounces of gold. Assuming gold today sells for about \$2,000 per troy ounce, David's offer would be the equivalent to more than \$400,000 today!

However, when we look at the parallel account in 2 Samuel 24:24, we see a difference: a sale price of only "fifty shekels of silver." At today's price of \$24 per troy ounce of silver, that equates to less than \$500. But a close look at the text reveals there is no contradiction. In the verse before us now, the price in gold is *for the place*, while the parallel text says the price in silver was "for the threshing floor and the oxen." So our text here indicates a more significant purchase of the land where the threshing floor was located. Since this later became the site of Solomon's temple (1 Chronicles 22:1), a conservative estimate is that at least 10 acres are purchased.

The Pseudo-Sacrifice

The people who know best the meaning of the word *sacrifice* are parents. The people who are second best at knowing that word's meaning are chess players. A sacrifice in both areas involves giving up something of short-term value in anticipation of a long-term benefit. Parents sacrifice their own short-term desires for the long-term needs of their children; chess players sacrifice a piece in exchange for a checkmate later. The common thread is that something of value is given up, which will result in hardship if no positive results are forthcoming.

A sacrifice that costs little or nothing is a contradiction in terms. Do you offer God pseudosacrifices? Do you share with Him less of your money than you spend on coffee every week? Think deeply about that: unless your financial giving causes you to do without something you would like to have, it's not sacrificial giving. The same goes for how you spend your time.

An acceptable sacrifice to God does not necessarily have to involve money, but it should be costly in some way. The sacrifices God appreciates the most are not even material. As the psalmist says, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Psalm 51:17). And that psalmist was none other than David himself.

—A. W.

What Do You Think?

How will you, like David, give to God even though it costs you something?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to develop the attitude that giving to God might require a cost?

C. Sheathed Sword (vv. 26–27)

26. And David built there an altar unto the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, and called upon the LORD; and he answered him from heaven by fire upon the altar of burnt offering.

We are not given the details of the *altar* David built. Given the urgency of the situation, we may speculate that it was hastily constructed from nearby materials. It may have been “an altar of earth” like the one in Exodus 20:24; that was the first instance of combining *burnt offerings* and *peace offerings*, explained in Leviticus 1 and 3, respectively.

The Lord’s fiery response must have been spectacular and awe-inspiring. Sometimes *fire* from *heaven* is judgmental (example: 2 Kings 1:10–14); at other times, it indicates divine approval in some sense (example: 2 Chronicles 7:1). In this instance, it seems to have reflected both.

27. And the LORD commanded the angel; and he put up his sword again into the sheath thereof.

There could be no better outcome than this.

III. The Sword of the Lord (1 Chronicles 21:28–30)

A. Ancient Tabernacle (vv. 28–29)

28–29. At that time when David saw that the LORD had answered him in the threshingfloor of Ornan the Jebusite, then he sacrificed there. For the tabernacle of the LORD, which Moses made in the wilderness, and the altar of the burnt offering, were at that season in the high place at Gibeon.

Although this story is about David’s sin, its consequences, and its resolution, it has other important information too. This story represents a transitional phase between tabernacle and temple as the proper house of the Lord, and between Jerusalem and *Gibeon* (five miles to the north) regarding location. The tabernacle made by *Moses* four hundred years earlier was still at the *high place* in Gibeon (2 Chronicles 1:13), not yet transferred to Jerusalem. Also in Gibeon was *the altar of burnt offering*, the concept of which also dated to Moses.

B. Fearful Caution (v. 30)

30. But David could not go before it to inquire of God: for he was afraid because of the sword of the angel of the LORD.

David doesn’t seem to believe he’s been forgiven fully! So the man who slew a bear, a lion, and Goliath (1 Samuel 17) shrinks back in fear of *the sword of the angel of the Lord*. Seeing the angel’s power has made David cautious (compare 1 Chronicles 13:12).

Conclusion

A. Community Suffering

Large numbers of people suffer deeply from the mistakes of a single individual. Think about the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian student in 1914, which kicked off World War I and the deaths of millions. In the Bible, consider the gross sins of King Manasseh, which resulted in God's sending Israel into the Babylonian exile (Jeremiah 15:4; see 2 Kings 21:16). At the birth of Jesus, the insecurity and ruthlessness of King Herod led to the massacre of innocent babies and children in Bethlehem and nearby areas (Matthew 2:16).

David understood that his prideful sin had resulted in the deaths of 70,000 men. The nearly 10 months it took before the census-takers returned (2 Samuel 24:8) can be seen as God's waiting period before He acted. He is patient—but His patience has limits (2 Peter 3:9).

B. Prayer

Lord God, we, like David, are imperfect servants because of our sins. May we never be so prideful or isolated from others that we do not see how our actions can affect those around us. Help us to choose responsibility and repentance for our sins so that others may not bear our consequences. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Our sin affects others.