

28. Grace in the end

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Date: 02 September 2012

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[0 : 00] Now, we come to our final study in the second book of Samuel and to the last chapter of that book, and you'll find that if you've got the Visitor's Bible on page 277, and we'll read the whole chapter.

2 Samuel 24, verse 1. Again, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, Go, number Israel and Judah.

So the king said to Joab, the commander of the army who was with him, Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people. But Joab said to the king, May the Lord your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see it. But why does my lord the king delight in this thing?

But the king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to number the people of Israel.

[1 : 11] They crossed the Jordan and began from Arur, and from the city that is in the middle of the valley, towards Gad and on to Jezer. They came to Gilead and to Kadesh in the land of the Hittites, and they came to Dan.

And from Dan they went around to Sidon, and came to the fortress of Tyre, and to all the cities of the Hivites and Canaanites. They went out to the Negev of Judah at Beersheba.

So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. And Joab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to the king.

In Israel there were eight hundred thousand valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand. 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.

[2 : 13] And when David arose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, Go and say to David, Thus says the Lord, Three things I offer you.

Choose one of them, that I may do it to you. So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, 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? Now consider and decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me.

Then 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.

So the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning until the appointed time. There died of the people from Dan to Beersheba seventy thousand men. And when the angel stretched out his hand towards Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented from the calamity and said to the angel who was working destruction among the people, It is enough.

[3 : 28] Now stay your hand. And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Aaronah the Jebusite. Then David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel who was striking the people and said, Behold, I have sinned and I have done wickedly.

But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father's house. And Gad came that day to David and said to him, Go, raise up an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Aaronah the Jebusite.

So David went up at Gad's word as the Lord commanded. And when Aaronah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. Aaronah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground.

And Aaronah said, Why has my lord the king come to his servant? David said, To buy the threshing floor from you in order to build an altar to the Lord that the plague may be averted from the people. Then Aaronah said to David, Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him. Here are the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood.

[4 : 40] All this, O king, Aaronah gives to the king. Aaronah said to the king, The Lord your God accepts you. But the king said to Aaronah, Know that I will buy it from you for a price.

I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing. So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for 50 shekels of silver.

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.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord and may he bless it to us. Now we'll take up the offering. Now if we could have our Bibles open please at 2 Samuel 24.

And we'll ask the Lord's help as we come to the scriptures. Let's pray. God our Father, I pray that you will take my human words in all their imperfection, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

[6 : 06] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.

Amen. Amen. nowhere more drastically than in that appalling novel which was so popular a few years ago, The Da Vinci Code, which simply fizzles out after a great deal of resume it has.

Have we reached an anticlimax in David's story and in the ongoing story of 1 and 2 Samuel?

Wouldn't it have been glorious if we could have finished at 23 verse 4?

Or he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning. Or the exploits of David's champions that we looked at last week. That would have been wonderful.

[7 : 20] But the story is not over. And especially as we come to the end of 2 Samuel, and more particularly these last few chapters that we've looked at over the last few weeks, we find that there has been a continual theme running through these.

And the continual theme has been the faithfulness of God and the fickleness of humans. God's mercy and God's judgment.

See, ultimately, this is not a story about David, as I've said so often. This is a story about God. If you look at the bookends of the chapter, look at verse 1 and then verse 25.

The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. Then look where it ends. The Lord responded to the plea. And these are the bookends, if you like.

These control the chapter and what's going to be in them. See, we're not walking through a museum here. We're not digging into ancient history. This is the word that the Lord is speaking to us now.

[8 : 29] And this is part, as we saw again this morning, part of the big story, runs from Genesis 3.15, the serpent crusher who will bruise the serpent and who will bring about God's purposes.

God's anger and God's mercy. Interesting, in Psalm 30, verse 5, which is significantly, we'll come back to this, Psalm on the dedication of the temple.

David says, his anger is but for a moment and his favor for a lifetime. That's the thing we need to remember. That's why our title is Grace in the End.

Only by grace can we enter. Only by grace can we stand. So let's look then at this chapter as it unfolds. What does it tell us about God?

It falls into three very obvious parts. The ESV headings characteristically describe the contents but don't actually help us to get into the theology.

[9 : 35] So first of all, we have the mystery of God's anger in verses 1 to 9. The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

Now, in one sense, God's anger is not a mystery. God judges us and judges the world when we sin and he is faithful and just to forgive those who repent and believe.

So the first phrase is not a mystery in itself. It's a grim reality. But we could understand it. Then again, now the again refers back to chapter 21, the first chapter of this last section of the book.

There was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year. That's what it refers to. And also this book of 1 and 2 Samuel has been full of the judgments of God.

The book begins with the vicious and rotten house of Eli, which God says he will judge, and he does. The unbelief of Saul. The mass following and defection towards Absalom.
[10 : 44] And of course, David's own sins, which we looked at as we went through chapters 12 and following. That's not the mystery. The mystery is twofold.

First of all, that God incited David. Once again, the anger of the Lord and he incited David. Why we say does God incite David to do something and then punish him for it?

That is the mystery. And just to make it more difficult for ourselves, the parallel account in 1 Chronicles 21 says that Satan incited David to number the people.

So we've got this problem. God incited Satan incited. Remember, the Old Testament will never, never allow there to be a power in the universe that's equal to God.

C.S. Lewis said the equivalent of Satan is not God, but Michael, the archangel. Satan is not an equal and opposite power.

[11 : 48] And in Isaiah 45, the prophet says, I, the Lord, create good and evil. The Old Testament will not allow what's called dualism.

There are two equal and opposite powers who are striving for mastery. All that happens is ultimately under the control of God.

Even the works of the devil, whom, as Luther said, is God's devil, is characteristically a vivid way. God meant it for good. Those are the words that Joseph uses of the dastardly and indeed satanic activities of his brothers.

You see, without in any way being polluted by evil, without in any way being affected by that, God works out his good purposes. I think we get some light on this in 2 Corinthians chapter 12.

Paul speaks there about the thorn in the flesh, which he describes as the messenger of Satan. He also says, I pleaded with the Lord three times to remove it.

[12 : 57] And the Lord chose in his wisdom not to remove it for Paul's own ultimate blessing. It's interesting. You read that chapter. That's the chapter where Paul is caught up to the third heaven, caught up to the very presence of God himself.

And yet Paul learned more from the thorn than he learned even from being caught up to heaven. Paul knew that Satan had no ultimate power.

He doesn't say, I besought Satan to remove it. He says, I besought the Lord to remove it. And Job, of course, painfully learned this as well. I know, says Job, you can do all things.

It is not a case of God stirring up David in order then that he can, like some celestial conjurer, actually punish David.

This is part of the great mystery of God's ways, whereby God uses even evil, even Satan himself, to bring about good in the end, to bring about grace in the end.

[14 : 00] That's the first problem. Second problem is, why was it wrong to number the people? What was so wrong about a census? You'll notice that Joab says to the king not to do this.

Now, Joab's a very ambiguous person. Commentators differ about this. Was this Joab being wiser than the king? Or was it, as I suspect, as we've noticed so often, Joab was a highly religious person, talking the language of piety?

Anyway, that's not particularly important. We can't be certain, but it does seem to me, since it was the army commander and the army, which were called to carry out the census, and then in verse 9, he gave, there were 800,000 valiant men, men of Judah 500,000.

It may be that David was actually numbering his armies. That may have been the case. It may have been that even at this late stage, he is still worried about the threat to the kingdom.

He still feels insecure, still concerned about military strength rather than trusting the Lord. I don't want to be dogmatic about that, but I think there may be a hint of that in the way the story develops.

[15 : 19] It's very interesting. One of his most faithful sons, Hezekiah, has similar temptations. Prophet Isaiah warns Hezekiah, don't go down to Egypt for help.

Don't trust in chariots and horses, but in the living God. If that's the case, surely it's a reminder we need grace to the very end. It's not as if David has made it in chapters 22 and 23 and doesn't need grace to the very end.

David, like all of us, needs not only grace to bring him safe thus far, but grace to lead him home.

Having said that, a sense of mystery remains, and we need to recognize this.

Now, God has revealed himself. God has revealed himself fully and finally in the Lord Jesus Christ. And we have the written word which so faithfully and uncompromisingly points to him.

We must never fall into the liberal trap of saying we can really know nothing about God. One prominent liberal said, we know God by the cloud of unknowing, by the mystery that surrounds his being.

[16:34] In other words, we know God by not knowing him. Now, we must not fall into that trap. On the other hand, we mustn't fall into the rationalist trap, which as evangelicals we're so often inclined to do, to explain every detail.

That's why I detest so much when people say they are going to explain the passage, as if it were simply a kind of formula, a set of propositions. Remember 1 Corinthians 13, we see through a mirror dimly.

We don't know the answer to this. There is a mystery. There will be many things we will never understand until we reach the Father's house. There is a mystery about God.

But it's a mystery. But it's not a mystery, which they say is totally incomprehensible, because God has revealed himself. But that's what these first verses are saying, the mystery of God's anger.

But the second section goes on now to the greatness of God's mercy, verses 10 to 17. I want you to notice as well, the brackets around this section.

[17:45] David said to the Lord, verse 10, verse 17, then David spoke to the Lord. In other words, prayer brackets the judgment.

David takes this to the Lord in prayer. Prayer brackets the plague, if you like, and mercy triumphs over anger. Now, the one thing we've seen over and over again in David's story is his readiness to confess his sin.

Remember the story of Uriah, that terrifying story we looked at some months ago. I have sinned, says David, and pours out his heart in the 51st Psalm.

It's not the first time we've heard him confessing his sin. And this is the huge difference between him and Saul. When Saul was rebuked by Samuel, speaking the words of the Lord, Saul made excuses.

Saul never admitted. Saul never confessed his sin. So, what's this saying then? First of all, David recognizes the true character of God.

[18:54] Who is this mysterious God who has incited him to number the people? And we saw this right through chapters 11 to 20. Where he's effectively praying the prayer of the tax gatherer.

Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. And that great hymn, Rock of Ages, which we sometimes sing, was described by a top lady, its author, as a living and dying prayer for the holiest saint outside of heaven.

This is not something we pray when we are saved, and then we can put it behind. This is a prayer we will need to pray every day of our lives. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

And verse 14. Then David said to God, 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. I'm sure he must have often felt this. The Lord understands. The Lord knows perfectly. With him is forgiveness, says one of the Psalms.

[20:06] Therefore he is feared. Here is a man who is gripped by grace. Now David was surrounded by all kinds of men. Hard and vengeful men like Joab.

Deceitful men like his own son Absalom. And he turns from all these, and even from his own supporters, and says, let me fall into the hands of the Lord.

Here is the true refuge. You see what David is saying? David realizes that mercy and grace are not occasional characteristics of God.

They're not something that he occasionally shows when he feels like it. These are at his very heart. For his mercy is great. Remember the great 136th Psalm.

His mercy, his heseth, his covenant love endures forever. And once again, just as a way back in chapter 12, God had shown his grace by sending Nathan the prophet.

[21:07] So now he sends Gad the prophet. Now Nathan and Gad have appeared at various points through David's story. And Nathan is to appear again as David's story is completed in 1 Kings 1 and 2.

We don't know why they disappear from the scene for a long period of time. But what we do know is that these were the men who brought David the word of God. These were the men, and Samuel first of all.

And then these men, Gad and Nathan, come with the word of God, reminding us that it is the message and not the messenger. Because as you go into the story in 1 Kings, there are a number of people, known and unknown, who bring the message of God.

Sometimes they're simply called the man of God, before we come to the great figures of Elijah and Elisha. David recognizes the true character of God. God is merciful.

And David comes to that God, Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. The other thing I want you to notice is that David is humble and the true shepherd of his people.

[22 : 14] Gad offers him three options, verses 11 and following. Choose one of these, says the Lord through Gad. David does not presume to choose, to second-guess the Lord.

David instead throws himself and his people into the hands of God. And then verse 17. I have sinned, I have done wickedly.

But these sheep, what have they done? Now, way back in 2 Samuel 7, the great covenant chapter, when God makes a covenant with David. David is to be the shepherd of his people.

This is one of the many places where David surely points to the good shepherd himself, who lays down his life for the sheep. Always a sign of a true shepherd, leaving the judgment to the Lord.

And notice verse 15. The Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning till the appointed time, and died of the people from Dan to Beersheba.

[23 : 21] Seventy thousand men. Then particularly verse 16. When the angel stretched out his hand towards Jerusalem to destroy it. This must surely echo a much earlier story, doesn't it?

The Exodus story itself. When the destroying angel went through Egypt, and the destroying angel spared those houses on whom the blood of the Passover lamb was sprinkled.

And that surely meant to recall it here. The destroying angel stops at the threshing floor of this otherwise unknown man or runner. Just as he stopped at the houses where the blood of the Passover lamb was sprinkled.

The awful grave which we sang of on the further side. And in between it stands the cross, two arms outstretched to save. That brings us to the third part of the story.

The wonder of God accepting a sacrifice. Verses 18 to 25. Once again, the word of Gad.

[24 : 33] Gad came that day to David and said to him, Go and raise up an altar to the Lord. Now, so often throughout the story of David, we have met the gospel, haven't we?

We've seen the face of Jesus Christ. We've seen in picture form the great truths that are going to be presented in the New Testament. And what's happening here, not only is the anger stopped.

The anger is removed through an atoning sacrifice. It's not just the angel stops there. It may come back some other day. It stops at the threshing floor of a runner.

David went up, as the Lord commanded, when a runner looked down. That's verses 19 and 20.

Threshing floors were usually built on high ground, obviously, to catch the breeze.

And that's the point. And David is going to buy this land and to offer sacrifices to the Lord. And as Abraham had done long before, he refused to accept the land for nothing.

[25 : 39] Remember way back in Genesis 25, when Abraham wants to have a piece of land to bury his beloved Sarah. He says he'll pay for it because this was a sign of the coming of the kingdom, of the resurrection that was to come.

Let me say two things then. First of all, this here may be called the threshing floor of a runner, but this was to be the site where the temple was going to be built.

Once again, read the parallel account in 1 Chronicles 21 and 22. When you read the chronicle, you'll find that although David was not allowed to build the temple, God graciously allowed him to be involved in the preparation and the planning.

This is, I quoted that psalm earlier, Psalm 30, which is a psalm for the dedication of the temple. And indeed, Solomon, in his great prayer in 1 Kings 8, says this, The Lord said to David, my father, because it was in your heart to build a temple for my name, you did well that it was in your heart.

Do you know what I mean by grace at the end? You did well that it was in your heart. This is encouragement for all of us. Now, I'm not talking about wrong and sinful desires, which you should never have desired in the first place.

[27 : 02] I'm talking about good and right things, but for some reason or other, we are never allowed to do. Godly ambitions, holy desires, which somehow or other, we are just not permitted to do.

I think the Lord says to us, you did well that it was in your heart. I always remember the words of the character in C.S. Lewis, for it is the courtesy of deep heaven, that when we mean well, he takes us to have meant better than we did.

We may not build the temple. We may not be allowed to carry out these ambitions. But when we longed for them, we did well. It was in our heart.

So you see, this temple, this threshing floor of Arana is the place, the temple where God is going to meet with his people, the temple where the Ark of the Covenant is going to be, where the mercy seat is, and where the Lord is going to come down in grace, and his anger is going to be turned away.

But secondly, the sacrifice that brings peace. In the last verse of the chapter, verse 25, there David built an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.

[28 : 30] Burnt offerings, that offering the most basic sacrifice, the sacrifice wholly consumed, showing, pointing to the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself without reserve, without stint, without hesitation, that we might be forgiven.

And the peace offering, which is a symbol of fellowship. Now, we are not David. You've heard that often enough. But we have David's God.

And as the letter to the Hebrews says, we have an altar. And that altar is the cross. The old chorus says, there's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin.

There's a door that is open, and all may come in. At Calvary's cross is where you begin when you come as a sinner to Jesus. And that's what's happening here, isn't it?

The Lord responded to the plea, and the plague, the judgment, was averted. This is no anticlimax. I'm awfully glad that the Spirit inspired the author to stop here and not earlier, because this brings us face to face with the amazing love.

[29 : 44] How can it be? Oh, my God, should die for me. This is the heart of the gospel. Every blessing in time and in eternity flows from the altar.

The altar that is represented here by the threshing floor of Orana. And I'm so glad that as the book closes, that is what the Holy Spirit is saying to us through the experience of David.

There is a way back to God. God's anger can be prevented, and sinners can be forgiven. That is the gospel.

Praise the Lord. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. It is mystery all, the immortal dies, who can explore his strange design.

In vain the firstborn seraph tries, the sound of the depths of love divine. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[30 : 50] Amen. Amen. Amen.