

The Sacrifice of Sin

2 Samuel 24:10-25 (NIV)

¹⁰ David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing." ¹¹ Before David got up the next morning, the word of the LORD had come to Gad the prophet, David's seer: ¹² "Go and tell David, 'This is what the LORD says: I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you.' " ¹³ So Gad went to David and said to him, "Shall there come on you three years of famine in your land? Or three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you? Or three days of plague in your land? Now then, think it over and decide how I should answer the one who sent me." ¹⁴ David said to Gad, "I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into human hands." ¹⁵ So the LORD sent a plague on Israel from that morning until the end of the time designated, and seventy thousand of the people from Dan to Beersheba died. ¹⁶ When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the LORD relented concerning the disaster and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, "Enough! Withdraw your hand." The angel of the LORD was then at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. ¹⁷ When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the LORD, "I have sinned; I, the shepherd, have done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall on me and my family." ¹⁸ On that day Gad went to David and said to him, "Go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." ¹⁹ So David went up, as the LORD had commanded through Gad. ²⁰ When Araunah looked and saw the king and his officials coming toward him, he went out and bowed down before the king with his face to the ground. ²¹ Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" "To buy your threshing floor," David answered, "so I can build an altar to the LORD, that the plague on the people may be stopped." ²² Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take whatever he wishes and offer it up. Here are oxen for the burnt offering, and here are threshing sledges and ox yokes for the wood." ²³ Your Majesty, Araunah gives all this to the king." Araunah also said to him, "May the LORD your God accept you." ²⁴ But the king replied to Araunah, "No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen and paid fifty shekels of silver for them. ²⁵ David built an altar to the LORD there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then the LORD answered his prayer in behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped.

"Everyone is gone. No one will notice. It's not that big of a deal. Besides, you won't get caught. It won't harm anyone. It's victimless. C'mon. Just do it. You know you want to." That little devil keeps sliding in evil prompts. He makes wrongdoing seem like it's no big deal, that you can get away with it.

Is that what was whispered in King David's ear when he came up with the idea to take a census of his kingdom to get a count for all his able-bodied fighting men? It doesn't seem like a bad thing to do. A good commander-in-chief should know what resources he has at his disposal, and that includes the number of fighting men. But this time, it was an ill-conceived plan. David's army commander, Joab, told David not to do this. First of all, David was finally done with wars. There were no wars going on or even any wars on the horizon. God had given him rest from his enemies. On top of that fact, Joab told David that God would multiply the troops a hundred times over if the need did arise. He reasoned that David had absolutely no good reason to count his troops because God is with him fighting these battles. The battles will not be won by numbers, but by God, as they always had been.

David ignored this advice and ordered the census anyway. After nearly ten months, David got the report. He had well over 1 million able-bodied men who could handle a sword. Immediately, "David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing.'" (verse 10) He knew that he had given into temptation, temptation to trust in his own might instead of God's, temptation to revel in his glory with a massive army than to thank God for his current time of peace.

The LORD summoned Gad the prophet and told him to bring a message in response to David's prayer. God gave David a choice between three possible consequences of his sin: three years of famine, three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you, or three day of plague in your land. David had already experienced three years of famine and countless months being pursued by enemies. Instead of having to rely on mercy from men, David chose the three days of plague. "Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great." (verse 14)

"So the LORD sent a plague on Israel from that morning until the end of the time designated, and seventy thousand of the people from Dan to Beersheba died." (verse 15) From the action of one man, one man giving into temptation, 70,000 people die. The truth of God's Word is undeniable: the wages of sin is death.

Similar temptation is whispered in our ears as well. “Everyone is gone. No one will notice. It’s not that big of a deal. Besides, you won’t get caught. It won’t harm anyone. It’s victimless. C’mon. Just do it. You know you want to.” The temptation grows in appeal because we think no one will be harmed by what we do. However, the consequences are more far reaching than we realize.

Not to sound like a Public Service Announcement, but texting while driving or speeding down the interstate seems harmless until that one distraction or that one miscalculation causes an accident. You’ve not just affected yourself, but your wrongdoing has spread to cause pain, possibly death, for the others involved, to the people in the other car, to their family, your family, to their friends, to the other travelers just trying to get to their destinations on time. So many are affected. Or think of the temptation to view pornography. It seems like you are the only person affected, but it damages your relationship with your spouse whether they know about what you’ve done or not. It may be found by your children inadvertently, sending them a message that this is okay.

Sin is never victimless. Even if you can come up with a scenario where no one else is harmed by what you are doing, there are always two people being harmed: you and the LORD. For you, the wages of sin is death, and the Lord watches you choose death. Think of what it must have been like for him to watch David ignore good, sound, biblical advice to not count his troops and do it anyway. It’s like a father who watches a son make choices in life. Yes, he has spent the time telling him and instructing him in what is right, but then the time comes to let his son make his own choices because the father can’t make them for him. The son makes bad decision after bad decision. Then the consequences come. The son has made his choices. The consequences have to play out, no matter how heartbreaking they are to the Father.

The LORD has instructed us. He has told us what is right, but then he watches us make decisions. He sees us fall for temptation after temptation. He lets us make those choices and his heart breaks with what we do. For just one slip up, one bad decision, the consequence is clearly laid out. I should die. The wages of sin is death. We are reminded of that consequence of our sin as we came here today and were told, “For dust you are and to dust you will return.”

Death is the consequence of sin, of my sin. Because I listened to the whispers of temptation and obeyed them, I know that I will die. I deserve it. That realization that I have wronged God comes out like David’s words: “I have sinned...Let your hand fall on me.” (verse 17) I accept the consequences of my sin, whether they are far-reaching or more localized. This is my fault. Death is my fault.

In our reading from 2 Samuel, it’s not David’s confession that stopped the consequences of sin. No, it was the great mercy of God that caused him to relent. “When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the LORD relented concerning the disaster and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, ‘Enough! Withdraw your hand.’” (verse 16) Then the LORD sent Gad to David again. This time the instruction was “Go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.” (verse 18) This is the place where God showed his mercy and had the angel stop carrying out the deserved punishment upon David and the Israelites. David, you are going to make a sacrifice here. The oxen will be wholly consumed. They will die for your sin.

David bought the threshing floor and oxen, built an altar there, and made the sacrifice just as the LORD had commanded. “Then the LORD answered his prayer in behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped.” (verse 25) In the generation after David, this altar became the same place where Solomon built the Temple, where sacrifices were offered day after day for the sins of all people. Almost a thousand years later, another altar of sacrifice was erected. This time it was an altar in the shape of a cross. On it, Jesus, true God and true man, offered himself to be the sacrifice to pay once for all the consequences of all sins – of David’s, of yours, of mine. By Jesus’ sacrifice, the plague of death was changed. After death there is now life. God gave himself up on the cross so that after suffering death, we would be raised from death and made to never die again.

The church season of Lent is often marked by giving up something. You may have already picked out what you are giving up for Lent, but here’s a challenge for you. Instead of focusing on sweets or beer or eating out, can you give up, can you sacrifice a particular sin that plagues you? David sacrificed his money for the threshing floor and animals to give them wholly to God. What can you ask God to help you give up? Is it the speeding, pornography, something else? This Lent sacrifice a sin that you have carried on for far too long.

On Ash Wednesday we are acutely reminded that the wages of our sin is death. For dust you are and to dust you will return. But the mercy of our LORD is great. He sacrificed himself to turn our wages of sin, which is death, into a gift of eternal life through the altar of the cross. Now we sacrifice our sin to live for him. We sacrifice our sin for the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.