

The Hand of the LORD

2Samuel 24:1-25

This morning we are coming to the end of our journey through the book of Samuel.

If we go all the way back to the beginning of 1Samuel chapter one we find the story begins with a woman who was childless.

Her name was Hannah and she came before the LORD with a deep and heartfelt plea to have a child and the LORD answered her prayer with the birth of Samuel whom she dedicated to God for his entire life.

Samuel was born at a time when the people of Israel had drifted from the LORD and a time when God had given them into the hands of their enemies.

Through his ministry the people were delivered, but they still had a tendency to wander which they showed when they asked for a king like all the other nations.

God gave them what they asked for and made Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin king.

He had a good beginning but he hardened his heart and God sought out another man to sit on Israel's throne, a young man named David.

The LORD raised David up from the humble beginning of being a shepherd, He made the boy into a mighty warrior, and gave him success time and again until eventually he became king over the whole land.

His rule lasted forty years and what we have in the book of Samuel and in the book of Chronicles is a summary of his life and reign as king.

As we come to the end of this book we are told about a situation that probably occurred in the later days of David's rule.

It is a passage that reminds us of one of the central themes of God's dealing with His people.

It is a passage about the LORD exercising His power in the world to bring about His plans and purposes.

One of the ways the Bible talks about God's power is by referring to it as His hand.

[For much of David's life we can clearly see the hand of the LORD being for him and the people of Israel. There are occasions, however, when the people and even David find themselves with the LORD acting against them. I can think of no greater fork in the road than that. Is the hand of the LORD for us or against us? That is the question we want to turn to as we look at this passage together, so turn if you would to **2Samuel 24:1-25**. In this text we can see at least three important lessons concerning God's power towards people. The first lesson is this, that...]

Point #1 – The hand of the LORD is against evil. (Verses 1-9)

If people live in opposition to God sooner or later they will be confronted by His power.

The first half of verse 1 gives us a phrase that is a recurring theme in the life of the Hebrew people in the Old Testament.

The writer does not tell us the specific reason why the LORD is upset with them, but we can say with certainty that the people were doing something, likely many things, to break God's laws.

You see one of the most basic things that we learn about God from the scriptures is that He always acts in a way that is consistent with His nature.

He doesn't get upset with innocent people.

He doesn't take action against people on a whim or for entertainment.

He does what He does because He is Holy and Just and those aspects of His nature mean that He must be opposed to what is evil in His sight.

That is the basis for what He does here. **(Verses 1-2)**

Admittedly, that sounds like God is leading David into doing something wrong.

The bible, however, is very clear that the LORD does not force or lead people into evil.

James 1:13 says, ***"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one."***

There is a parallel passage to this chapter in 1Chronicles 21 and there it says that Satan is the one who incites David to number Israel.

There is no contradiction between the two passages as some might think.

Instead, these passages are encouraging us to have a proper perspective on the sovereignty of the LORD over evil.

Satan is the one directly tempting David into this course of action, but he can only do that because the LORD is permitting it.

The devil never acts outside of God's knowledge and power and the LORD permits and restricts Satan's activity to bring about what He desires.

It is also important to see here that David is not being controlled like a robot, look with me at **verses 3-4.**

Joab knows that what David is proposing is wrong and he asks a very good question of the king. He asks, "...why does my lord the king delight in this thing?"

What the king is asking for here is what he is wanting. Yes the temptation is put before him, but no one is forcing him to do this.

So God is controlling this situation by allowing both the devil and the king to do what they want, in this case to count the people.

Now, why was counting the people wrong? Commentators point out the people of Israel are counted multiple times in the Bible and God approves.

What is different about this? I think verse 9 points us to the problem as it gives us the results of the census.

After Joab and commanders of the army travel throughout the land they find 800,000 of Israel and 500,000 of Judah who were ‘valiant men who drew the sword’.

This is about something more than wanting to know how many people are in the land, this is about knowing the strength of his military.

The problem here is most likely that David’s heart is starting to trust more in the number of his soldiers than the power of God.

So here we have the people of Israel living in a way that is inviting God’s wrath and God permitting David to pursue a course of action that would be the ground upon which He brings judgement upon the nation.

He is acting in His power against evil.

[Over the years I have had to opportunity to teach kids some basic carpentry skills. One of the things that drives me bananas is when kids fail to pay attention to the instructions. On more than one occasion a student will bring a piece of wood to the saw and I can immediately tell they are going to cut it in the wrong place. I’ll ask, “Are you sure you want to cut it there?” They’ll say without hesitation, “Yes!” I’ll say, “Ok go ahead!” A few minutes later they will realize their mistake and that it means they have to start all over again. I could have stopped them, but when I feel they need for them to learn the lesson of paying attention I will let them do what they want and suffer the consequences.]

That is the way the LORD often deals with people.

In fact Romans 1 describes the wrath of God being revealed from heaven as a giving people over to their own evil desires.

The LORD doesn’t force anyone to do what is wrong.

When people live in rebellion against God it is according to their own will.

While the LORD does permit that rebellion He is not indifferent towards it and He will act against it.

[That should be a fearful thing in our hearts and minds. We are talking about the all-powerful creator of all things bringing judgment against evil. There is no winning that battle. Both individuals and societies who persists in rebellion will at some point be confronted with that reality. That happens here in this passage and what we see in the next section is this second lesson, that...]

Point #2 – The hand of the LORD can be severe. (Verses 10-17)

The consequences of having to face God's wrath are harsh beyond what most people appreciate.

According to verse 8 the counting took a little over nine months to complete.

It is significant that Joab and the commanders of the army had travelled throughout the land because it keeps God's purpose in all this at the forefront of the passage.

God's purpose in this is to deal with the sins of the people as a whole and to have every region and tribe numbered gives us a picture of the whole nation.

So for nine months David stayed locked into this mindset and then we read this in **verse 10**.

The LORD had allowed the king to harden his heart, to persist in this course of action, and then according to His grace God convicted David.

On account of that conviction he confesses his sin, he makes no excuses nor does he blame shift in any way, he simply pleads for forgiveness.

God's response comes through the prophet Gad, He gives David the choice of three consequences which we find in **verse 13**.

Each of these things is mentioned in Deuteronomy 28-30.

In those chapters the LORD speaks to people of Israel as they are about to enter into the Promised Land to take possession of it.

God tells them that if they serve Him with gladness and live according to His laws the land will produce, their enemies will be subdued, and plagues will be kept from coming upon them.

On the other hand if they abandon the LORD, disregard His laws, and worship false gods then there will be famine, their enemies will overcome them, and sickness and affliction will come upon them.

Now God could have just made any one or a combination of those things happen, why does he go through all this with David?

The best explanation, I believe, lies in the role of the king.

The king was supposed to represent the people before the LORD and he was supposed to represent God to the people.

Either David was unaware of the sin of the people that had kindled God's anger or he had been complacent about it.

In his ordering of the census he is tied now to the guilt of the people.

As their representative he is the one who has to choose the consequence.

The choice he makes is given to us in **verse 14**.

He wants to take the human aspect of this judgement out of the equation.

Karl Keil suggests that famine would put David into the hands of other nations that had food, the human element of fleeing from enemies is obvious, but pestilence or plague is something directly from the hand of God.

If there must be a consequence he wants it to come directly from God's hand trusting in the greatness of His mercy.

Verses 15-17 describe for us what takes place.

To say that this is a significant consequence is, I think, an understatement.

This is roughly five percent of the number that was given to David through the census.

That is a significant number of people who lose their lives on account of their sin.

Here is where many people want to object.

How can the LORD be so harsh?

The reason we are tempted to think along those lines is because for the most part people want to make disobedience and indifference towards God into a small thing.

Most often the heart behind people sitting in judgement of God's judgements is a sense of entitlement.

People expect the LORD to give them what they want and don't care much if at all for anything that He wants.

From time to time though He shows us what our sins deserve and it is awful.

[Several years ago I was sitting on the porch of a friend's house waiting for him to get home and across the street there were two guys burning a pile of leaves. They must have thought that the fire needed some assistance because they got out the gas can and poured the fuel directly from the can onto the fire. Fortunately for them the can did not explode but it did catch on fire. Their solution was to kick the can which sent it end over end with flames shooting out of it. It wasn't long before the fire department arrived and put out the flames and no one was hurt. No one was hurt but both of them could have been severely injured because they were being careless with gasoline. What if they did it again and again? Eventually something really bad would happen because that is the nature of gasoline.]

That is what it can be like when people persist in sin, but it is way more dangerous than gasoline.

When God uses His power to bring judgment against sin it can be severe.

Some people would probably say, "That is just an Old Testament thing!"

Do you know Jesus talks an awful lot about hell?

Do you know that all the writers of the New Testament talk about the severity of God's judgment?

Hebrews 10:31 says, “*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*”

[It is important for us to see that reality, because if we fail to see that we will fail to appreciate what happens in the last part of this chapter. Did you catch what happened with the angel that was bringing destruction upon the people? He is getting ready to destroy the capital city of Jerusalem. The angel sees no reason to stop, he is pouring out justice and wrath against a rebellious people. Why does he stop? Because, it says, the LORD relents! He does that even before David pleads on behalf of the people. That happens because amazingly...]

Point #3 – The hand of the LORD offers mercy. (Verses 18-25)

While living in rebellion against God deserves eternal destruction, He consistently relents from giving us what we deserve and instead extends opportunity for forgiveness and restoration.

While God had commanded the angel to hit the pause button on the destruction of Jerusalem, the angel was still there.

When David sees him, he is standing by the threshing floor of a man named Araunah.

It is fascinating that he stops at a threshing floor.

That is the place where a farmer in ancient Israel would bring his harvest of grain to separate the grain from the stalk, the useable portion of the harvest (the grain) from the part that has no value beyond fuel for fire (called the chaff).

That is an image used in multiple places in the scriptures to illustrate the sorting of people you loved and served the LORD from the people who despised and rejected Him.

That is what happens when God comes in judgement and that is the task given to this angel.

Now the angel is ready to treat everybody in Jerusalem like chaff, but something else happens instead. (**Verse 18**)

Instead of the city being destroyed, David is given the opportunity to build an ‘altar to the LORD’ right here at the threshing floor.

Verses 19-24 record for us the interaction between the king and Araunah.

Araunah is seemingly unaware of the presence of the angel because he asks David in verse 21 why he has come.

The king explains he has come to buy the threshing floor to make an altar so that ‘the plague may be averted from the people’.

Do you see? The king is going to act on behalf of the people by offering a sacrifice to the LORD.

While Araunah seems to be unaware of the angel's presence at his threshing floor he certainly seems aware of the devastating plague moving through the country and is eager to help.

He offers David whatever he needs at no expense, but look with me at **verse 24**.

In order for this sacrifice to truly be from David the resources of the sacrifice must belong to him.

Having made the purchase we read this in **verse 25**.

Both of these types of sacrifices deal with sin.

In both kinds of sacrifices the one offering the sacrifice would put their hand on the head of the animal which is a picture of the animal taking on the offences of the one making the offering.

The animal was then killed and its blood poured out against the altar.

In the burnt offering the whole animal was consumed on the altar, a picture of complete dedication to God.

The peace offering was slightly different. While some of the animal was burned on the altar, a portion of kept back for the worshipper to eat.

It served as a picture of communion with the LORD.

The one who has peace with God is welcome at His table for fellowship and provision.

According to my dictionary of the Pentateuch when a 'peace offering' was made along with other offerings it was always the last and that is certainly the case here.

It is a way of saying the sacrifices have been accepted by the LORD and the relationship between Him and the worshipper(s) has been restored according to His mercy.

That is what happens here. It says 'the plague was averted from Israel'.

God's mercy given to the people through the offering of the king.

That would continue in this place for centuries as the threshing floor of Araunah is the place where Solomon would build the temple.

The people needed their king to act of their behalf so that they could receive God's mercy.

How much more is that true of us?

How much better of a king do we have than David?

Like the people of Israel we all have fallen short in many ways.

If God were to give us what our sins deserve then His hand would be against us and we would be consumed.

Instead He extends His hand in mercy towards us through the Person and Work of King Jesus.

Jesus died on a cross not far from where David offering these sacrifices.

Jesus though doesn't come to God offering the blood of oxen or sheep on our behalf, the book of Hebrews tells us that He comes to the Father on our behalf with His own blood.

Unlike David, Jesus has no need to make atonement for His own sin because He has always lived in perfect obedience to God's law.

It is because of His wondrous perfection that His blood can atone for all our sins.

Because Jesus offered Himself for us we can have peace with God buy trusting in His sacrifice alone for forgiveness.

That is the offer of His mercy and it is made possible by the strength of His hand to do what is impossible for anyone else to do.

How I hope you know your need of the King today.

How I hope you know the joy of being held fast by His strength instead of the hopelessness of His hand being against you.

How I hope you have a sense of the severity of God's power coming against sin so that you would have the deepest possible appreciation for His mercy.

I hope you know brothers and sisters that in Christ we are safe in the Hand of the LORD.