

The Testing of David, the Census, and the Land for the Temple (1 Chr 21)

Building a House for God's Name: Studies in 1 & 2 Chronicles

I. REVIEW: BUILDING A HOUSE FOR GOD'S NAME

- A. As the Lord has been at work in our church over this last season, he has been calling us into a season of "*building the house*". This is in line with the vision of what God has given us to become and build a praying church that pursues his presence and his purposes for Kansas City.
- B. One of the ways we are seeking to strengthen and establish what God has put before us is by preaching through the books of Chronicles. These books were written to strengthen and encourage those who had returned from the Babylonian exile with the charge to rebuild the house of the Lord (cf. 1 Chr 9.1-2).
- C. These books are written to demonstrate that the people of God are designed to live in submission to the rule of the right Davidic king and in accordance with the rightly ordered worship of the Lord. This vision of living under the blessings of God's kingdom is meant to orient the people of God toward a wholehearted pursuit of him.
- D. In 1 Chronicles 17, David had desired to build a house (dwelling place) for the Lord. We have seen that David possessed a unique revelation of the need for a place where God could rest. This vision consumed his life and leadership, dictating much of what he was given in his life.

¹Remember, O Lord, in David's favor... ²how he swore to the Lord and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob, ³"I will not enter my house or get into my bed, ⁴I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, ⁵until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob. (Ps 132.1-5)

- E. However, God did not allow David to build the temple. Rather, he made a covenant with David, promising to give him a name and a kingdom that would last forever (1 Chr 17.7-14). It would be David's son, Solomon, who would be given the charge to build the temple. The realities of the covenant made with David will govern much of the remainder of the Chronicler's presentation of Israel's history — particularly the ability (or the inability) of the sons of David to order and establish the worship of the Lord (represented in the temple and its worship order) at the center of Israel's life.
- F. The remainder of 1 Chronicles (chs. 18-29) details the ways that David painstakingly made preparations to make for Solomon ready and able to build the temple. In chapters 18-20, we see David expanding the boundaries of the kingdom of Israel in order to *give rest* to the people against their enemies.
- G. The main purpose of 1 Chronicles 21 is to narrate how David *acquired the land* that would be used for the building of the temple. Yet, this chapter is one of the most perplexing and theologically difficult narratives in the books of Chronicles. It brings us face to face with issues of God's sovereignty, his wrath and judgment, demonic activity, and human responsibility.

H. Outline of 1 Chronicles 21

1. David incited to take a census (1 Chr 21.1-6)
2. God's displeasure and judgment (1 Chr 21.7-17)
3. David acquires the land for the temple and appeases God's wrath (1 Chr.18-22.1)

II. DAVID INCITED TO TAKE A CENSUS (1 CHR 21.1-6)

¹Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel (1 Chr 21.1)

- A. In the opening verse of this chapter, we are given three concepts that must be understood to gain insight into the broader narrative.

B. **Satan:** we are introduced first to a being who is standing against Israel and inciting David to take a census of the people.

1. The idea of a being called “Satan” is elusive and unformed throughout the Old Testament literature. The name is derived from a common noun that simply means “opponent” or “adversary” (see 1 Kings 5.4). However, this is one of three places in the OT where Satan is used as a proper name.

⁶Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them (Job 1.6)

¹Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. (Zech 3.1)

2. These uses portray for us a particular being (“angelic”) in God’s court who functioned in a role of opposing or accusing God’s people.
3. It is not until the book of Revelation that the Spirit reveals that the angelic adversary (Satan) was identified with the serpent in Genesis and the devil — the chief adversary of God and his people.

⁹And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world (Rev 12.9)

4. It is also important to note here (will discuss importance below) that the Chronicler applies the role of adversity to Satan while the author of 2 Samuel ascribes the role of adversity to God himself. This creates a theological paradox that we must seek to understand.

¹Again, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go, number Israel and Judah.” (2 Sam 24.1)

C. **Stood against Israel:** In this verse we also see that Satan is not standing against David, but rather is standing against Israel.

1. This is an important piece of information in understanding what is happening in this narrative, and in understanding the relationship between the king and the people.
2. It is likely that what we see here is that Satan is standing against Israel for the purpose of testing them in accordance with the covenant promise of God.

D. **He incited David:** Yet, it is not to all of Israel that Satan comes for the purpose of testing, but rather to David alone.

1. This demonstrates that David is, in fact, the representative head of God’s people at this stage in redemptive history. As God had told David, he was to be the “son” of God and the head of God’s people.
2. This testing of David’s fidelity to God’s covenant is a predominant theme throughout the Scriptures, where the Lord determines/allows a test to follow the appointing of his vessel who is chosen to bring forth his purposes in the world. David, much like Adam, Abraham, and Israel, is now tested as the recipient of God’s covenant promises.
3. This understanding of the narrative helps us see the ways in which this points to Jesus’ role as the ultimate son of David. Immediately after the public confirmation of his sonship and his anointing for public ministry, Jesus is driven into the wilderness to be tested by Satan.

¹⁶And when Jesus was baptized... the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” ^{4.1}Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. (Matt 3.16-4.1)

III. GOD'S DISPLEASURE AND JUDGMENT (I CHR 21.7-17)

- A. Immediately we are told in this section that the action of taking the census brought upon David and Israel the displeasure of the Lord. For taking the census, the Lord gives David (through Gad, the seer) three options for judgment that descend in length from three years of famine, three months of enemy oppression, or three days of pestilence from the hand of the Lord.
- B. In a similar manner to what we experienced in 1 Chronicles 13 with the death of Uzzah, it would be easy for us to believe that this is an overreaction on God's part related to a simple numbering of the people. However, in a similar manner, the Chronicler both gives narrative clues and expects his readers to have a familiarity with the OT prescriptions surrounding censuses that help us understand why this act was displeasing to the Lord.

1. First, we see from Joab's words in the initial section elements of this census as a mark of David's lack of faith in the covenant promises of God. It is likely that the Chronicler wants us to understand that David's numbering of the people (presumably for the purposes of war) was presumptuous based on God's promises to subdue his enemies (cf. 1 Chr 17.10) and multiply the people of Israel as he had promised to Abraham.

³But Joab said, "May the Lord add to his people a hundred times as many as they are! Are they not, my lord the king, all of them my lord's servants? Why should it be a cause of guilt for Israel?" (I Chr 21.3)

²³David did not count those below twenty years of age, for the Lord had promised to make Israel as many as the stars of heaven. ²⁴Joab the son of Zeruiah began to count, but did not finish. Yet wrath came upon Israel for this, and the number was not entered in the chronicles of King David. (I Chr 27.23-24)

2. Second, we are to understand that there were provisions within the OT for taking a census, that came with them severe consequences if not followed. In a similar manner to the first attempt of moving the ark, it could be that David's inability to seek out obedience to the prescriptions of God's law led to dire consequences.

"The Lord said to Moses, "When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the Lord when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. (Exod 30.11)

- C. After recounting the displeasure of the Lord, the Chronicler narrates David's repentance and the turning of his heart toward God upon this sin. It is important to see that David does not seek to excuse himself from responsibility, but rather fully owns his *sin* ("I have sinned"), his *culpability* ("I have done this thing"), and his *unbelief* ("I have acted very foolishly").
- D. When given the decision between the judgments that were to befall Israel, David pleads to fall into the hands of God because of his mercy — understanding that even in the expression of his justice, God alone remains merciful and gracious.

IV. DAVID ACQUIRES THE LAND FOR THE TEMPLE AND APPEASES GOD'S WRATH (I CHR 21.18-22.1)

- A. To appease God's wrath, David purchases the threshing floor of Ornan in order to build an altar and offer a sacrifice.
- B. When Ornan offers to give David the field and the resources required to make the sacrifice, David refuses the gift — understanding that this sacrifice must *cost him something* in order for it to be a pleasing sacrifice to the Lord.
- C. After building the altar and placing the burnt offering upon it, God answers from heaven by sending fire upon the altar, demonstrating that the sacrifice was accepted before him. In receiving and accepting the offering, God reverts his hand of judgment against David and Israel.

V. THEOLOGICAL APPLICATION

A. *The Importance (Necessity) of Seasons of Testing*

1. One of the lessons we can learn from this passage is the important, and even the necessity, of seasons of testing in the life of believers and spiritual families. Whenever God calls someone (or a corporate body) to a work, there will be seasons of testing that must happen as God brings forth maturity and allows his work to be strengthened.
2. Understanding the complexities of these types of seasons is essential for us as we walk through them in order that we might rightly understand what God is at work doing, and what he desires for us in them.
3. A Biblical test is designed to highlight (reveal) what our lives are truly built upon. In God's economy, tests are not pass/fail examinations, but instructive seasons that allow us to see more of what is real in line with his evaluation, in order that we might be changed and transformed.
4. Elements at work in a season of testing:
 - a. **God's discipline:** God is sovereign and powerful over every season of our lives. He allows (and ordains) seasons of testing in order to discipline his children. This happens as things that can be shaken are shaken in order that we might receive foundations that cannot be shaken (Heb 12). God also uses these seasons to bring forth outcomes that we could not have imagined (and likely would not have asked for) apart from them.
 - b. **Demonic activity:** We also see in seasons of testing that Satan is at work to oppose, accuse, and stand against God's people. During seasons of testing God allows the increase of demonic influence and activity to "put more pressure" of God's people. We are to seek to discern where this is happening and resist this influence by fighting against it with the armor of God (cf. Eph 6.10-20; Jas 4.7; 1 Pet 5.8-10).
 - c. **Human choices:** The reality of God's sovereign leadership and the activity of Satan and the demonic in no way excuses the moral responsibility of people making choices throughout seasons of testing. We see from this passage that David is **fully responsible** for his actions before God. In seasons of testing we are to seek to walk in a spirit of humble submission and obedience to the Lord's will.

B. *The Severity of Sin, God's Wrath, and the Cost of Redemption*

1. What we see from this passage is that sin is not neutral, but rather it is treason against God's holiness and his glory. As such, it is worthy of experiencing the just retribution and punishment for it incurred by God's wrath. Because of this, we must not make light of sin, compromise, or disobedience in any form.
2. The beauty of the gospel is that God has made a way for his wrath to be appeased apart from anything that we could do. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has answered from heaven "paid and accepted" upon the sacrifice of Jesus. Now, any who receive this gift by faith can be assured that the sword of the Lord is no longer raised against them.

C. *The Cost of Discipleship*

1. This passage also demonstrates for us a beautiful heart response in understanding our offerings to the Lord. Although we cannot pay the price to bring redemption and salvation, we are called to give of our whole lives as living sacrifices in response to the Lord — as those who have become recipients of his forgiving grace and mercy.
2. We, like David, must have a vision of costly discipleship ("I will not offer that which costs me nothing") as those who pick up our crosses and follow in the way of the one who laid down his life for us.