

Reformation Sunday 2020

The God of Plagues and Angels, Grace and Men – 2 Sam 24

Introduction – In this passage we find a nation in trouble with God, a king who makes a decision that makes things far worse, a plague sent by God, hints of political ramifications and greater judgments to come, and the sovereignty of God over, in, and through it all (sound familiar?). This is Reformation Sunday and so let us reflect on the exhaustive sovereignty of God, the fallenness of man, the justice of God, the basis of the Protestant Reformation, the Doctrines of Grace, and how nations are supposed to deal with God in the midst of things like plagues.

The Story – God’s anger was aroused again against Israel (we are not told explicitly why) and so He made David make a bad decision; David calls for a census of Israel and Judah (v1). David tells Joab to go do so and Joab thought it was a bad idea; nevertheless, David’s command prevailed (vv2-4). Joab travelled from Dan to Beersheba for over nine months collecting the data (vv5-8) and the number was 800,000 in Israel and 500,000 in Judah, “*valiant men who drew the sword*” (v9). David is immediately condemned in his heart for doing this and confesses it all to the LORD (v10). The next morning, Gad, the prophet of the LORD, comes and tells David he must choose one of three options; seven years of famine, three months of enemy attacks, or three days of a plague in the land (vv11-13). In great distress, David chooses the three days of a plague for he would rather fall upon the mercies of God than into the hands of men (v14). The LORD sent that plague from Dan to Beersheba and 70,000 died (v15). At the appointed time, the Lord relented just as the destroying angel stretched out his hand over Jerusalem, near the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite (vv15-16). When David saw the angel, he offered himself as well as his household to save the people, his sheep (v17). Gad came and told David to build an altar on that threshing floor (v18). David went and tried to buy the property from Araunah who wanted to give it all to him, along with all David would need for the sacrifice (vv19-23). David refused to make an offering to God that cost him nothing and so paid Araunah 50 shekels of silver (v24). David offered ascension offerings and peace offerings and the plague was stopped (v25).

Sovereignty and Fallenness – The difficulty of understanding the foreordination of God alongside the free decisions that fallen men make is front and center here. We are not told what Israel had done to incite the Lord’s anger “*again*” (possibly referring to 2 Samuel 21), but we know from the whole of Scripture that God is not arbitrary or capricious in His judgments. Because of His anger, God stirred up David to number the people (v1). Afterwards, because he numbered the people, David and the people were judged. This looks like the classic “puppet does something bad and the puppeteer smacks the puppet, saying “bad puppet.””

And what was sinful about the census? The law allowed and assumed that censuses would be taken (Ex 30:12). We are not told explicitly but there are some hints. This story comes on the heels of the list of David’s “*mighty men*” (ch 23) and notably the last on the list is “*Uriah the Hittite*” whom David had murdered to cover up his sin with Bathsheba. Another hint is that Joab, not a godly man but a shrewd political man, thought it was a bad idea. David repents when he hears the “*numbers*” (v10) which were of the available soldiers split between Israel and Judah (note – this is before the dividing of these into two nations). Was David surprised to find out that Judah was outnumbered? Was he trusting in his forces to keep the people together? Did the revelation of the outnumbering exacerbate a growing conflict? Well, we do know what happens after Solomon’s reign.

We don’t know exactly what was going on, but God did and does (Isaiah 46:10, 48:3, Psalm 115:3, Eph 1:11). And we know that God “*moved David*” to “*Go number Israel and Judah*” and then condemned David for doing so. It looks like God could be charged with puppet smashing. But Paul answers such carnal reasoning in Romans 9. If God has mercy on whomever He wills, and hardens whomever He wills, then why does He still find fault for who resists His will (Rom 9:19)? Paul rejects such sophomoric thinking. “Who are you to talk back to God” (Rom 9:20)? Is the pot going to judge the potter?

Some want to point out that God doesn’t know the end from the beginning, that He doesn’t hold all of history in His hands. And they will use this story as an example, for God “*relented*” or changed His mind (v16). First of all, if we took this plainly, as opposed to an obvious example of an expression (like calling an “earthturn” a “sunrise” because of perspective), we end up with a fickle god who does not ultimately control anything. But He had already said that the plague would continue for three days and v15 says that “*at the appointed time*” which would be those three days. But second, consider the alternative. What would we be saying God repented of? He repented of killing 70,000 people because He was angry at David for something He made David do. And to make matters worse, the parallel passage in 1 Chron 21 says that God sent Satan as His agent to entice David.

There is no way to make sense of this except through the reformed Doctrines of Grace which could be nicknamed Calvinism. We could summarize all of that with two main tenets: #1 – God is God and God is good, and, #2 – Man is not God and man is not good. This means that we are never in a position to judge what and why and how God is orchestrating human events. Any other theological position leaves us with an impotent God, one not worth believing in, one not worth trusting in, one not worth following. But, praise be to God, Paul will spend what we count as three chapters (9-11) discussing this at great length and ends with this doxology – *“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God...”* (Rom 11:33-36). Sovereignty, fallenness of man, and the grace of God.

When God Strikes with Sin – James tells us that God tempts no one (James 1:13). God is present in us by the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matt 4:1), and we are taught to ask God not to lead us into temptation (Matt 6:13) as if He might. There is however, a deeper understanding. The Greek word can be translated “tempt” but also “test” and that is the key. God is not interested in tempting you to fall, but rather to test you and mature you up in the faith and in your obedience.

But God also turns people over to their sins as a judgment for their sins. For those who will not acknowledge God nor give Him thanks, He gives them over to their lusts and vile passions (Rom 1:18ff). While God will judge us for our nation’s murdering of millions of babies, of our kinky sexual vices, and of our selfish anger and bitterness, it is also true that these are the judgments of God upon us already.

Angel at the Threshing Floor – But God had other plans and its all foreshadowed in this story. The Angel of the Lord (possibly a theophany of the Second Person of the Trinity) stopped after *three* days of judgment, a judgment David selected because he said *“let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are great.”* The LORD stopped the Angel *“at the appointed time”* just as he reached his hand over Jerusalem (and we should see the similarity to the Exodus story when the Angel of Death was stopped over Jewish homes where blood was placed on the doorposts). God knew that one day, *when the fullness of time had come*, He would send a blood atonement by means of His only begotten Son, to save Jerusalem – the New Jerusalem. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, offered up to God, and through Him we now enjoy the peace offering with God. David built an altar on a threshing floor where wheat and chaff are separated. David’s Son would be lifted up as an offering where all of mankind would be sifted like wheat – all nations will be judged – all mankind will be judged (Matt 3:12). And where was the place this altar was built? It was Mount Moriah, where Abraham was tested in the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22:2-14) and where Solomon would begin to build the temple (2 Chron 3:1). God would one day destroy that temple by means of wicked men. And Jesus would also say, *“destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”* (John 2:19) speaking of His body.

That’s a whirlwind of passages, prophecies, allusions, and foreshadowings to unpack. Two things to take away. God’s sovereign and good purposes flourish in the midst of temptations, trials and judgments. And also, God provided the gracious, sufficient work of Jesus Christ as the atonement for His people. *Sola Christus, Sola Fide, Sola Gratia*. Where can we find deliverance today? In Christ alone. By grace alone. Through faith alone.