

Bowing to a Bigger Throne

May 19, 2024

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

1 Chronicles 21:1-17

Session Outline

1. Choosing to Sin (1 Chronicles 21:1-8)
2. Far Reaching Consequences (1 Chronicles 21:9-15)
3. Humbled to Repentance (1 Chronicles 21:16-17)

Theological Theme

Sin matters to God and the consequences of sin are often far reaching.

Call to Action

Our sin doesn't just impact us: its consequences reach farther than we understand or intend. As we take inventory of our "kingdoms," may we give glory to God alone—not just for receiving what we don't deserve but also for not receiving what we do deserve.



Leader Guide

Bowing to a Bigger Throne

Introduction

No one needs to be taught to shift blame. From an early age, people have a natural tendency to point to others as the reason for their own wrongdoing. Unfortunately, this is not something we automatically outgrow, as evidenced by the number of adults who operate in this way. It is not uncommon to see reports of celebrities, politicians, and other well-known people pointing a finger at someone else and saying, “They made me do it!”

But we don’t only see this “out there,” we experience the same temptation in our daily lives. Sinful people do not readily take responsibility for their actions, and this causes issues to abound, just as we will see in the life of King David.

- ❓ How big of an issue do you think blame-shifting is in our world today?
- ❓ Why do you think people struggle with accepting responsibility for their actions?


Session Summary

King David demonstrated what it means to willfully choose sin but accept responsibility for that decision. At the end of David’s life, we learn he gave in to the prompting of Satan to conduct a census that went against what He knew God had established as parameters for counting and numbering.

By taking the census, David was declaring ownership over those who were the Lord’s and that sin had consequences. Although he had significant time and opportunity to call off the census, David continued in the face of opposition from other leaders, only to later recognize the great mistake he had made. But instead of shifting blame for the sin toward anyone else, David humbled himself and accepted responsibility. He responded rightly but the consequences remained. Further, we are reminded our sin has consequences for us but can also impact others in our lives.

1. Choosing to Sin (1 Chronicles 21:1-8)

King David, nearing the end of his life, made a crucial mistake by giving in to temptation from Satan to sin against God. This is another reminder that even the most revered Biblical characters are not unlike us: they were real people who did wrong things as well as great things. Studying their lives through the pages of Scripture allows us to learn from what they did right as well as where they strayed from God's path.

 Why is it important and helpful to see figures in Scripture as real people that we can relate to today?

David reflected on his life and rule as king. Having issued his last words, we are told he responded to prompting from Satan to take a census. This act may not seem like a big deal, especially given that census taking was commonplace in the Old Testament. But that counting and numbering was only allowed for that which a person owned. This principle is explained in Exodus 30:11-16, where God made the connection between taking a census and ownership. By initiating a count of his troops, David was assuming more power than he had and usurping God's place as owner of Israel. The only way that a census should have taken place would have been at the instruction of the Lord, the rightful owner of Israel. Further, this act was an indication that David sought confidence in his military strength and not in the Lord who had been his strength and refuge throughout his life.

Although this situation could seem innocuous, the reality is any one of us can fall into the trap of thinking we own what God has given us. When we set ourselves up in a place that belongs to God, pride starts to take over and we begin to believe we have the right to do whatever we choose. Others around David, like Joab, counseled him against this census. But pride causes us to listen to the wrong voices and ignore those who speak wisdom. Joab was a good leader who challenged his superior by asking David to clarify why he gave that instruction.


 What is the connection between pride and sinfulness in our lives? Why are the two almost always intertwined?

Unfortunately, David's desire to take credit for his armies and seek security in the military power prevailed over the wisdom of various leaders around him. When a leader chases after personal glory, it leads to poor decisions, as we see in David's life despite the godly counsel he received.

David's Temptation

The parallel in 2 Samuel ascribes David's temptation to God (2 Samuel 24:1), but the Chronicler attributed it to Satan. The reason for this difference is the theological purpose of each writing. The Old Testament ascribes all things to the sovereignty of God, indicating His control over all creation (Isaiah 45:7). However, the Chronicler emphasized the holiness of God and featured Satan as the direct cause for David's sin. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, Satan (the accuser) acts under God's direction (Job 1:6; Zechariah 3:1).

A census of this size took several months to complete, giving David additional time to call it off and get back on the right track, but he failed to do so. Even as he followed the king's orders, Joab demonstrated his respect for the Lord by refusing to count men from the tribes of Levi and Benjamin. As the ill-fated census was finished, the Lord was displeased, and Israel would suffer the consequences just as Joab had feared. Thankfully, although David willingly made a sinful choice, he finally recognized his sin for what it was and humbled himself in repentance before God.


 Application: In this passage we see that David listened to Satan, ignored wise counsel, and finally submitted to God. Where are these three paths present in your life today? How is God calling you to respond?

2. Far Reaching Consequences (1 Chronicles 21:9-15)

David's response to his sin teaches us some valuable lessons. In a world where blame is passed around freely, he accepted responsibility for his sin. David owned up to his failings and showed wisdom and character in the way he chose the resulting judgment. David also recognized that his sin was against God as he repented of his grasp for glory.

Through the prophet Gad, the Lord offered David an option of what consequence would follow his sin. Being given the opportunity to choose one's punishment is not always the norm, but in this case, God used it to reveal David's heart and wisdom as a leader.

None of the options were good for David and the people but they would have different effects. During three years of famine, the whole country would suffer and have to seek help from neighboring regions. Three months of being defeated by enemies would result in death of many troops, and Israel would suffer as a country under the oppression of neighboring enemies. The last option of three days of plague in the land would be over quickest but would still have devastating consequences.


 What does the difficult nature of each of these options communicate about the seriousness of sin? How can remembering the seriousness of sin be a help to us when tempted towards sin?

How do you make a decision like the one David faced? It stressed him out, and after considering the available options, David chose to throw himself on the mercy of God. By choosing the plague, David opted for the consequence that he would face alongside the people. In the first

two options, the king and his family might be protected from a measure of suffering due to their elevated position. The plague would come on the land for three days and no one would be protected from its effect. As the leader who brought the judgment onto the land, David knew he should be willing to suffer alongside the people of his country.


 How did David's decision show humility as a leader?

This plague resulted in great calamity as “seventy thousand Israelite men died” (v. 14). But it was not as severe as it could have been, and David's choice was proven wise when the Lord stopped His angels from completely destroying Jerusalem.


 Application: What do you need to trust to the Lord in your life? What can we learn from this painful experience for David?

3. Humbled to Repentance (1 Chronicles 21:16-17)

What happened when the Lord stayed the hand of the angel is a picture of the mercy and provision of the Lord. David was blessed to see the angel standing between heaven and earth with a raised sword. Though the destruction had halted, there remained imminent danger and David responded appropriately.

 How have you experienced the mercy of God in your life when you repented after recognizing your sin?

David and the elders humbled themselves before God and David repented. It was a defining moment, and the king took full responsibility for all that had occurred. He asked that God dole out His punishment onto David and his family instead of the people who had done no wrong in this instance. This revealed the heart of the David, as he desired to suffer the consequences directly and not cause others to face the repercussions of his sin.

 How did David's response show that his repentance was real and not just a momentary response to the consequences of his sin? How do we show true repentance in our lives?

David's encounter with the angel of the Lord was at the threshing floor of Ornan and the place where God relented from his punishment of the plague on Jerusalem. As the Lord does, He invited David back into fellowship with Him with the instruction to build an altar there and worship Him (v. 18). When we repent and humble ourselves, the Lord is quick to invite us back into intimate fellowship with Him, and worship is always the right response.

Threshing floors were typically built on higher places so that they could catch the wind as a help with the threshing process. This particular threshing floor was located on Mount Moriah. You may recognize this as the same place where Abraham built an altar to sacrifice Isaac. It also figured as a significant site in the years following this situation. The Lord provided a way for David that day as He did for Abraham and as He has done for us in Christ.

We will make wrong choices and sin; it is our nature in this fallen world and an ongoing struggle for all Christ followers. The key is how we respond when we fail. David showed the great harm that comes to us and those in our lives from willful sin. But there is also mercy and grace when we humble ourselves and repent. David's story reminds us anyone can get caught up in reaching for glory and prestige that belongs to God alone.



Application: What can you apply from David's story to your own life?

Conclusion

No one is immune from making sinful choices. Even at the end of his life, David still struggled with listening to the right influences and overcoming temptations to sin. Satan appealed to the pride of the king and prompted him to take a census to identify the number of fighting men in Israel. Taking a census in that day should only have occurred in response to the Lord's instruction because it signified ownership. David fell into the trap of pride over all he had accomplished as king and sought security in the strength of his armed forces.

As Christ followers, we should guard against this same temptation and learn from David's mistake. When we start to think that our security is in our accolades or a physical show of strength, we are stepping into dangerous territory. When we do make foolish choices, it is imperative that we refuse to blame others and accept responsibility David did when he humbled himself and repented before God.



Where are you tempted to find security or purpose in things outside of God?



How can our group support one another by speaking the truth as Joab did to David in this account?



Who will you seek to have a gospel conversation with this week? How might sharing about the life of David help in this?

Prayer of Response

Thank the Lord for His grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Ask for wisdom to see where you are vulnerable to falling into pride and sin right now.

Memory Verse

David said to God, "I have sinned greatly because I have done this thing. Now, please take away your servant's guilt, for I've been very foolish." —1 Chronicles 21:8

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Chronicles* by Adam Dooley
- *1, 2 Chronicles* by J.A. Thompson
- *The Message of Chronicles* by Michael Wilcock

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of 1 Chronicles

Purpose

Having resettled in Jerusalem after the exile, the people needed to reconnect with their identity as the people of God. Chronicles met this purpose by reminding them of their heritage and by directing them back to God's presence in their midst as symbolized by the temple. The important ideas that 1 and 2 Chronicles emphasize are (1) a direct connection to God's people in the past; (2) the continuity of the line of David on the throne of Judah; (3) the centrality of the temple and its rituals in focusing on God; (4) the importance of music in worshiping God; (5) the invincibility of God's people when they obey him; and (6) the inevitability of punishment when God's people disobey him.

Author

An ancient tradition ascribes the authorship of Chronicles to Ezra. The author must have lived sometime after the return of the Jews to Israel from the Babylonian exile. He also had a strong interest in the reimplementation of the law and the temple, and he must have had access to historical records. All of these criteria suit Ezra, and this identification is corroborated by the fact that the last verses of Chronicles are the first verses of the book of Ezra. However, since the book does not explicitly claim Ezra for its author, in these notes we will refer to him simply as the "Chronicler."

Setting

The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles include extensive genealogies from the time of Adam and take the reader up to the period of the nation's exile and restoration. First Chronicles gives us the genealogies and focuses on the reign of King David. Second Chronicles focuses on all the kings who followed David up to the exile and restoration. It covers the same time period as 1 and 2 Kings, but 2 Chronicles focuses exclusively on the kings of Judah. The content of the books necessitates that they were written sometime after the return from the exile, perhaps the middle of the fifth century BC.

Special Features

The word Chronicles in Hebrew has the meaning of an ongoing account, almost like a journal or diary or minutes taken at a meeting. They are the first and second books of a four-book series that includes Ezra and Nehemiah. Together these four books provide a priestly history of Israel from the time of Adam to the rebuilding of the house of God and the walls of Jerusalem. At one time the book of Chronicles was probably one single scroll, which was divided later for convenience by those who translated the Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint, aka LXX).

Extended Commentary

1 Chronicles 21:1-17

21:1 Satan is not mentioned often in the OT. When he does appear, he is the adversary of someone beloved by God (Jb 1:6; 2:7; Zch 3:1–2). The parallel passage in 2 Samuel makes it clear that Satan would not have been able to cause trouble for David if God had not let him (2Sm 24:1). The census itself was not an infraction of God’s law (Nm 1:2; 26:2). David succumbed to the sin of pride. This could have included thinking that the men of Israel were his to enumerate, not God’s, and that he could take refuge in military strength rather than God’s sovereignty. He also violated rules that God had given for carrying out a legitimate census. The law stipulated that each man who was counted had to donate a half-shekel to the temple treasury (Ex 30:11–16). God had decreed that a census taken without these provisions would be punished by a plague.

21:2 David placed Joab in charge of this project, reinforcing the idea that the purpose of the census was to evaluate military capability. The expression from Beer-sheba to Dan signifies the entire country from south to north.

21:3 Joab knew that what David was proposing would bring harm to everyone, so he objected strongly.

21:4–5 The number that Joab came up with was astounding—over one million armed men from all Israel (probably including both the northern and southern tribes) and (or including) close to half a million from Judah. This is one of the cases in which the numbers in Chronicles are different than those in Samuel, where eight hundred thousand are from Israel and five hundred thousand are from Judah (2Sm 24:9). The difference may be a matter of textual transmission, or the two authors may be counting different units from Israel. Samuel’s count of Judah may be a round number. Some scholars argue against the likelihood that such a large army could have been assembled in Palestine and that the word rendered “thousand” would be better understood as “military unit.”

21:6 Joab refused to include the tribes of Levi and Benjamin. Perhaps he did not want God’s judgment to fall on the tribe of priests or the tribe in whose territory the tabernacle stood.

21:7 Exactly as God had foretold in Ex 30:12, he punished this illegitimate census with a plague.

21:8 Even before the effects of the punishment were apparent, David realized he had done wrong; he pleaded with God to forgive him.

21:9–13 Gad and Nathan were the two prophets associated with David. Both of them had the unpleasant duty of announcing divine punishment on the king they served (2Sm 12:7). Gad presented David with three options for punishment: (1) three years of famine, (2) three months of devastation by his enemies, or (3) three days of . . . plague on the land. David chose the plague, reasoning that it most directly involved the hand of God and therefore had the most potential for mercy.

21:14 David had wanted to know how many men he had at his disposal. By divine retribution he wound up with seventy-thousand fewer than he had before the census was taken.

21:15–17 The spread of the plague is attributed to an angel from God (2Ch 32:21). The angel was about to inflict the plague on Jerusalem. He was fully visible, hovering above the threshing floor of Ornan. David and the elders of Israel saw the angel floating in a menacing posture with his sword ... stretched out. David pleaded with God to spare the innocent people and let him suffer God's punishment. Ornan is a variant for "Araunah" (2Sm 24:18).¹

References

1. Winfried Corduan, "1 Chronicles," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 631.