

The Books of 1 and 2 Chronicles

Lesson 9: David's Census and the Threshing Floor -- 1 Chronicles 21:1-22:19

There is a kind of sin that does not look like sin from the inside. It does not arrive with a leer or a sneer. It arrives wearing the clothes of reasonable management, of prudent planning, of a leader simply wanting to know what he is working with. David, the man after God's own heart, decides to number Israel, and the counting feels harmless until the chill of conviction settles in. Sometimes the most dangerous sins are the quiet ones that swell the chest with pride while everyone around us nods in approval.

Watch how the chapter opens. Satan stands up against Israel and moves David to number the people. Then watch what David himself says when the bill comes due: I have sinned greatly. Both are true. The tempter tempted, and the man chose. We live in an age that loves to assign blame anywhere but to the mirror, and Chronicles will not let us off the hook so easily. There is a real adversary, and there is a real you, and the second does not vanish because of the first.

What follows is one of the hardest and most beautiful scenes in all of Scripture. Judgment falls, the angel's sword is stretched out over Jerusalem, and David, looking on at the ruin his choice has caused, cries out that he is the one who has done wickedly. He is sent to a particular plot of ground, a threshing floor owned by a man named Ornan, and there, on that exact piece of dirt, an altar is built where judgment is halted by mercy. Hold onto that location. God is doing something across the centuries that David cannot yet see.

By the end of these chapters David is an old man with a holy obsession. He cannot build the temple himself, but he will pour out his final years gathering gold and timber and stone so his son can. The threshing floor where mercy met judgment becomes the very ground where the house of God will rise. As we walk through this passage, we are learning how a forgiven man spends the rest of his life: not paralyzed by his failure, but laboring with everything he has for the worship of the God who spared him.

Group Discussion: Where in this passage do you see human responsibility and the work of the tempter held together, and why does the Bible refuse to let one cancel out the other?

Personal Reflection: Think of a sin you have been tempted to excuse because someone or something else pushed you toward it. What would it look like for you to say, with David, 'I have sinned greatly,' and own it fully before God?

Read 1 Chronicles 21:1-22:19

Study Questions

1. What does David's census reveal about the particular danger of pride, and why was numbering the people an offense against the God who had always been Israel's true strength?
2. Where are you tempted to take a quiet census of your own resources, accomplishments, or following, and to draw security from the count rather than from the Lord?
3. How do verses like 1 Chronicles 21:1 and 21:8 hold together the reality of the tempter and the reality of David's personal guilt, and what does this teach us about blaming our sin on outside forces?
4. When you fall, do you reach first for an excuse or for confession, and what has that pattern been costing your walk with God?
5. Why does David insist on paying full price for the threshing floor, refusing to offer to God that which costs him nothing (1 Chronicles 21:24), and what does true sacrifice cost?
6. Where have you been offering God leftovers, the convenient and the cheap, rather than worship that genuinely costs you something?

7. What is the significance of the place God chose, the threshing floor of Ornan, becoming the altar where judgment was stayed and later the site of the temple itself?
8. What unfinished, God-honoring work could you begin preparing for now, even gladly, that others may one day complete after you, as David prepared the temple for Solomon?
9. Bring together what this passage teaches about sin, personal accountability, God's discipline, and His mercy: how does the threshing floor, where the destroying angel was halted and an altar of atonement was built on the very ground where the temple and its sacrifices would stand, help us understand a God who is both perfectly just and rich in mercy, and how does this anticipate the place where God's justice and mercy would finally meet in Christ?
10. Looking back across these two chapters, name one specific way Jesus is forming you through David's failure, confession, and costly worship, and what is the next step of obedience He is calling you to take?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Ezekiel 18:20, the soul that sins shall die, each person bears his own guilt before God; James 1:13–15, temptation does not excuse us, sin is conceived when our own desire gives consent; 2 Samuel 24:1–25, the parallel account of the census and the threshing floor; Hebrews 9:22–28, atonement and the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ where justice and mercy meet; Hebrews 12:5–11, the loving discipline of a Father who corrects the children He receives