

Judgement of a Nation

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[0 : 00] Now when we think of the state of our country or our church or the nation just now, it must seem when we look at the kind of things that have been legislated for and the kind of things that have now been permitted and encouraged and promoted in our land, it must seem that David's particular crime or sin of simply numbering the people, taking a census, must seem rather insignificant by comparison.

I think, oh that's not exactly a big sin compared to what we're guilty of, is it? And yet, as has been pointed out other times and by other preachers, a sin against God is a sin to the nth degree. A sin against a perfect and divine and eternal being is a sin of divine proportions, is a sin of eternal magnitude.

And if we're just to sort of get a bit of context here, we have to recognise that there was an occasion in the past when the Israelites were numbered, but that was for the purpose of assessing people's strength and giving for raising the tabernacle, something which would be to the glory of God. And even there, and even at that time, there is the sense that God was kind of making an exception, allowing Moses to number the people, even though that in itself was something that would require atoning for and was in a sense a wrongdoing.

[1 : 38] If we read in Exodus chapter 30 from verse 11, the Lord speak unto Moses, saying, When thou takest the sum of the children of Israel after their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul unto the Lord when thou numberest them, that there be no plague among them when thou numberest them.

Notice exactly what had happened when David numbered the people in the Chronicles, and again in 2 Samuel there, a plague, a pestilence breaks out because he numbers the people. This they shall give, every one that passeth among them that are numbered, half a shekel, after the shekel of a century, a shekel is 20 years. And half shekel shall be the offering of the Lord. Every one that passeth among them that are numbered from 20 years old and above shall give an offering unto the Lord. The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel when they give an offering unto the Lord to make an atonement for your souls. And thou shalt take the atonement money of the children of Israel, and shalt appoint it for the service of the tabernacle of the congregation, that it may be a memorial unto the children of Israel before the Lord to make an atonement for your souls.

[2 : 56] So in the setting up of the tabernacle worship, the children of Israel were, if you like, assessed. There was a kind of numbering of 20 years old and upward. Every, every, it implies every man, every male amongst them.

Half a shekel he was to pay. The rich were not to pay more. The poor were not to pay less. And no doubt, this was partly to demonstrate the fact that in the service of God, and where the atonement of Christ and of God is concerned, the rich are not worth more, and the poor are not worth less. Everyone is of equal standing in the sight of the Lord. We are all sinners in need of atonement, in need of redemption. But because there was this reason, this motive, which was a God-honoring and God-appointed motive for this particular numbering of the people, the Lord permitted it. Although the atonement money, if you like, was to give up a ransom, as it were, for their souls. But one reason why there was need for an atonement even then is because God had specifically promised to Abraham that his descendants and his covenant seed and line and so on would be without number.

In other words, beyond numbering. If we go back to Genesis 15, we see at verse 5, he brought him forth abroad and said, Look now toward heaven and tell the stars if thou be able to number them.

[4 : 29] And he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the Lord and he counted it to him for righteousness. The stars cannot be numbered by men and women, but they can be numbered, of course, by the Lord.

Turn a few pages in Genesis 22. We read at verse 15. The angel of the Lord called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time and said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore.

And thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice.

As the sand upon the seashore, innumerable. This was to be the inheritance of Abraham's descendants. They were to be beyond counting, beyond numbers.

And as long as that number was not specified, and was not precisely known, then in one sense the promise was seen to be true. But the suggestion here is that David perhaps simply wants to know, for his own pride and grandeur, Bring the number of them to me, verse 2, that I may know it.

[5 : 57] Why does he, maybe for taxation purposes? Maybe it's simply to be able to boast of how many men he can put into the field. If we were to go back to its parallel passage in 2 Samuel 24, we read at verse 1 again, The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah.

So on the one hand, it seems like it's the Lord, who's angry with Israel, with David, and sort of provokes this numbering. But here we read that Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel.

Are these two saying different things then? Are they non-reconcilable? Of course they are reconcilable. The only reason that Satan is able to stand up against the Lord's people, against the Lord's anointed here, is because the Lord withdraws his protective and comfortable presence. The Lord withdraws for a time from David, because for whatever reason, he is angry with Israel. We read, The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved, that is, he allowed David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah.

Satan is only able to get in at the Lord's people, when the Lord withdraws his protection for a time. Why would God do that, we might say?

[7 : 23] Why would God ever leave his people for a time, and withdraw from him at all? He might do it in order to test their faith, to expose them, yes, to a temptation.

But as we've said often in the past, temptation is not in and of itself sin. Temptation is not wrongly in itself, if it is not given into.

To be tempted, and to sense temptation, is not in itself sin. And if the soul is strengthened against it, and if it emerges out the other side, stronger for having resisted, then that soul is built up in its Christian faith.

It is strengthened. It is wearing the battle scars, as it were, of that wrestling with Apollyon. It has come through, and so it is more experienced, more battle-hardened, more strong in the ways of the Lord.

But David here, he doesn't resist this temptation. He gives in to it, and numbers to people. Sometimes, however, to return to our point, sometimes God may withdraw his comfortable or protective presence for a time, even from his own people, and allow them to be exposed to temptation, and to the attacks of the evil one.

[8 : 44] Thus we have here, Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number his sin. Now, as I've said, numbering the people does not seem to us that big a sin, but in terms of the promises of God, it amounted to an act of either unbelief or putting God to the test.

Let's just see how many people the Lord has given to us. Let's just see what my strength exactly is. Let's just see how many people I might be able to tax, or whatever the case may be.

It is to reduce that which is meant to be, designed to be, indefinite, as numerous as the sand on the seashore for multitude, to reduce it to an arithmetical figure.

Which, of course, the minute it's taken, will be out of date anyway. Because by the time Job has gone through the country, gathering all the census figures, you know, some people will have died, new babies will have been born, the population will go on changing and be fluid the whole time.

So any census, even with our own sophisticated modern technology that can gather things in quickly and accurately, will be out of date, even the day that it is gathered, because the population and the people are always changing.

[10:04] And so it would be like was for David here. But when we think of the resultant punishment that came upon Israel and upon David because of this particular sin, then it does make you wonder and tremble for what God's reaction to Scotland must be.

What God's view of this land was once so blessed, once so privileged, where within the living memory of some, the Bible and the Catechism was taught not simply in Sunday school, but in school, in the state-sponsored schools, children were brought up with the Word of God and the Catechism in their home, where church was the norm, where the Christian faith was so much filtered through the oxygen of society that we, yes, admittedly, may have fallen foul of that particular snare, that we regarded ourselves as a Christian country and as though anybody who belonged to this country was automatically Christian, by culture, if not by divine belief.

But that spawned its own problems, of course. And since then, of course, we have been biting back, kicking against the bricks, tearing down whatsoever remained of the old landmarks or the foundations that once our nation was built upon.

And God's church has not been immune to the disease and the cancer of unbelief and compromise. Even where, as our own branch of the church, doctrinally and in principle, we remain unchanged and we remain unaltered in what we subscribe to and what we sign up to and what we believe, the Bible, the confession of faith without any adulteration, without any weakening of it.

Even just now, of course, the church is looking at re-examining the vows that are being taken by ordinance and by those who will train for the ministry and so on.

[12:20] But leave that aside. If we were to say, look at the commitment levels amongst the Lord's people who might say, well, if somebody were to show an interest in the things of the gospel, if they were then to become a professing Christian, would they prioritise the things of God nowadays?

Would the prayer meeting be prioritised over, say, football practice or swimming or an extra few hours on the job or whatever it might be. And it's not just the young.

It is throughout the generations there is this dilution of what we consider an acceptable level of commitment to the Lord.

It is throughout the church. It is throughout our own souls. It is there compared to any previous generation where it would have been accepted that if you are the Lord's, you are the Lord's a hundred percent and the Lord takes priority over everything.

That is often no longer the case. Now this isn't meant to be just a case of breast beating and oh how terrible we are and so on. But there's meant to be and there should be and there ought to be.

[13:32] Well that's a recognition that we are not as we once were. That we have followed as a nation and as a church we have diminished and diluted the strength of our zeal and our love and our commitment for the Lord and it is as Jesus said in Matthew's account of the Gospel because iniquity shall abound the love of many shall wax cold.

And iniquity saturates our society nowadays. It saturates the unbelieving world and because this is the air we breathe we cannot help but be infected by it.

We cannot help but have our standards adulterated and diluted in what we will accept and what we won't accept. None of us is immune from this. And even in the same generation people who at one stage would adhere solidly to unquestioning devotion and faithfulness to the Lord.

We are more down to the more. We are more easy going ones. It's not wrong to be more relaxed in some things about the things of the Lord and to recognise that God is our friend and the lover of our soul and the one who will always be with us as well as being a judge and king and mighty saviour.

We do need to get a balance with the love as well as law and some things are good but we are weakened and we see that we get in.

[15:07] We see it in society. We see it across the church and it was quite a shock to me. We know of course that things in our own congregation have diminished a bit somewhat.

We have lost some people whether they're becoming housebound or transferring elsewhere or moving away whatever the case may be. We've lost some people and we've gone down probably by about a third in recent years and our income levels are down a bit as well as a result of that too. And it was quite a surprise to me discovered just in recent weeks that this diminution is found across the church. I thought it was just us here but it's not just us here.

The whole church at large has diminished by about a third in terms of its people and its income. And I don't know how that's happened and I don't know where it's come from but clearly it is a reason for us as a nation and as a church to be turning back to the Lord.

We read here David said unto God I have sinned greatly because I have done this thing but now I beseech thee do away the iniquity of thy servant for I have done very foolishly.

[16:22] And then God is given this message to come to David with choose what you would have as a particular plague as a particular punishment do you want three years being defeated by your enemies do you want three months of plague or three days of pestilence at the hand of the Lord.

And David doesn't know what to choose. It's like if somebody were to say to you when you were younger and been caught out of doing something wrong enough how do you think I should punish you? What are you meant to say from that?

You know you could stop my pocket money or you could give me a stamp or you could send me to my room for a week or whatever it might be. How are we meant to come up with what is a right and just punishment?

Because of course we're going to want to choose what seems to be the most lenient. But David wisely here and the grace and the spirituality of David is not pleading here for what he thinks will be the most lenient simply or how he's going to get off most lightly but rather he says let me fall now into the hand of the Lord for very great are his mercies but let me not fall into the hand of man so that even if God's judgment should be severe you know 70,000 people dying from pestilence is pretty severe in the space of three days that's pretty heavy and the angel of the Lord ready to destroy Jerusalem as well but David's point is that God's punishment God's chastisement what God ends up requiring of us will be just it will be proportionate it will be tinged with mercy it will not be the merciless harsh bloodthirsty revenge of mere men if he falls into the hands of men of his enemies they will be pagan enemies there will be no restraint no mercy no justice no concern for proportionality they will just be savage because man without God man without the Lord is no more than a savage he becomes unbelievably cruel he becomes tainted by the sense of his own importance that he is the ultimate

God small g and even if he will worship something he calls a God that God a false God will be cruel man without the Lord is reduced to the level of a savage and David please do not let me fall into the hand of man but rather let me fall into the hand of the Lord whatever he requires whatever his punishment is to be whatever his justice whatever his chastisement I know it will be right I know it will be just I know it will be proportion I know it will not be more than I can do now of course Paul reads to this Corinthians where he says there's no temptation and taking temptation is a sort of punishment or chastisement in that sense but it is a danger we go into nobody is tempted more than they are able to bear nobody can say well that's why I gave into it it was too strong for me [19:57] God will not allow you to be tempted by something that you were not actually capable of resisting he will only send against you that which he knows you have the resources within to resist he has given us enough we don't always use it wisely or as we should but he will never cause us and allow us to be tempted more than we are able to bear and he will never punish us more than we are able to stand remember what he says in Isaiah when he says there a smoking flax he will not quench and he won't put out you know it won't snap out the soul that is weak there he won't crush the weak he won't be merciless and cruel it's Isaiah 42 that a bruised reed shall he not break and the smoking flax shall he not quench he shall bring forth judgment unto the truth the lord loves judgment that doesn't mean he loves judging people he loves coming down on people like a ton of bricks it means rather he loves justice he loves righteousness and if there has been wrongdoing then the wrongdoing must be put right and if there is that for which there has been a cost that cost must be paid and if there has been crime there must be punishment but the punishment will be proportionate it will be right it will fit the crime notice how often in the bible particularly in the law codes of god back in exodus and the litigis and so on how often you're talking oh an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and how cruel that is and how vengeful if you think about it it's not that at all it is rather that what you have seen fit to do to others it must be regarded as you think of as perfectly okay to have done to you so if you think it's okay to gouge out somebody's eye then it must be okay to have yours gouged out if you think it's okay to cut someone with a knife then it must be alright to have that done to you if you think it's okay to smash somebody's window then it must be okay to have your window smashed so that what you think is okay to do to other people you see exactly what it is like when it is done to you that is the balance that is the proportionality of eye for eye tooth

for tooth hand for hand foot for foot burning for burning wound for wound strike for strike it is that if you if you steal somebody's ox you make it good and then so if somebody's sheep dies under your hand well you can't bring back the dead sheep but you can restore them three or four more sheep it is it is always proportional it is always just and it is always merciful because the person whose eye you have gouged out is not allowed to kill you they're allowed to take your eye but they're not allowed to kill you the person that you have wounded with a knife or whatever is allowed to wound you but they're not allowed to kill you it is always measured it is always proportionate but we must shudder when we think what will the Lord what would the Lord regard as proportionate judgment proportionate punishment on a land such as ours which has now legalised all manner of filth and depravity where millions of unborn children are slaughtered and that's approved of and that's

regarded as okay the blood of the innocents cries out of the ground to the Lord from this land where children are soon to be taught a whole manner of pornographic indecency in their schools all of this God will require it at the hand of this land a mission and here in the midst of the land yet his own church of God his own church of Jesus Christ and we are here and we are this but the Lord knows we are not as we should be we are not zealous and filled with love of the Lord as we ought to be so often the things of the Lord become to us and we must all include ourselves I include myself in this too can seem at times like a chore like oh again tonight's another meeting and another this and another that and abandon rather than a sinemous opportunity we are all flesh and blood we are all guilty in this regard and these are not the only things the church of God is guilty in terms of but our need is to turn to the

Lord in prayer as David does here he admits his guilt I have sinned greatly because I have done this thing but now I deseech thee to do away the iniquity of thy servant for I have done very foolishly and the Lord does do it away but there's a price first to be paid and we all have to live not with the guilt or the price in the sense of Christ blood washing all our sin but we all have to live with the effects of our sin if we the damage that we do we will have to live with you know if I break somebody's window in the middle of the winter and the cold wind and the rain will still come through it and they may say it's okay I forgive you but the window is still broken and the effect is still there and the suffering is still to be bad and so all is still is outpoured upon his son David said unto God I am in a great strength let me fall now into the hand of the

Lord for very great are his mercies but let me not fall into the hand of man but eventually in due course when David obeys God he goes to buy at this good and worthy price he the Jebusite there that site of which in due course the temple would be built and Jerusalem would have its centre and its soul as it were would be in this location which at this point in time is up above the then city of Jerusalem where the angel is standing up above it with his sword stretched out over Jerusalem would be lower down on the side the hills to the side of and here David buys the site and sacrifices to the Lord he obeys God and it costs him as he says in the Samuel parallel with this I will not offer unto the Lord burnt offerings and that which doth cost me nothing and at that time

David gave to him the 600 shekels of gold by which he built an altar to the Lord offered burnt offerings and peace offerings called upon the altar of the Lord and the Lord commanded the angel and he could have his sword again into the sheep they loved the Lord was entreated for his people just as we trust and believe he will be must be entreated by the prayers and petitions of his people not just for ourselves though there is need for us to be ripe and to be improved to be as iron sharp and iron that we be brighter and sharper and quicker in the things of the Lord and we be more zealous for him yes there is need for all that but also that we may be enabled by grace to be a salt and light in the midst of our land and nation which at present in spiritual terms is getting tirelessly near to pitch black and we have need to cry out to the

[28 : 29] Lord for this land that we love now whatever our political views may be whether we may be nationalist or unionist or whatever our thoughts may be about the best way to govern this land we all love our land we all love the place of our nativity and our birth and our growing up we all love it regardless of whatever the scenery may be or the place from which we have come we all love it we all long for its good we all long for the best for it if we would have the best for our land it is only God who can give it it is only God who can pour out his spirit upon it it is only God who can bless the souls and the hearts and the soil and the sea it is only he who can bring forth riches out of this balance who can restore also the equal balance that everybody seems to be supposedly obsessed with nowadays only

God is in a position to restore all this balance and to restore all this propriety again to creation but it cannot happen while man insists that there is no such God that creation isn't creation it's just the planet and it's the environment and it's our responsibility to fix it how are we going to fix what we cannot control only God can solve the problems of this creation this planet this foreignness but when the Lord is entreated by David when he sacrifices where he is told to when he is told to in the way that he is told to in other words when he returns to the Lord with all his heart and soul and with all his practice God and God is entreated and the Lord commanded the angel and he put up his sword again into the sheath and at that time reading on from where we were when David saw that the Lord that answered him that said the tabernacle of the Lord which Moses made in the wilderness for that season in the high place he sacrificed there but David could not go to the tabernacle for he was afraid because of the sword and the angel of the Lord said this is the house of the Lord God and this is the altar of the burnt offering for Israel that place of deliverance would become the centre and soul of the entire kingdom if there is one thing that is more powerful than never having looked into the death or hell it is having been there and having been brought back from it and the very site of the temple itself would be testimony to the fact that God was entreated for Israel on that site that the Lord can be implored and the direction can be changed and that it can make a difference and that prayer works because it is addressed to a God who is ready to work and ready to save and ready to deliver when we come to him in prayer together as a church and on behalf of the mission to have it do to