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The Mystery of God's Ways II Samuel 24

Intro: On Oct 1st, 1939; in a radio broadcast on the BBC; **Winston Churchill** made the following observation about Russia: he said Russia was **a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma**. As Hitler's armies were advancing thru Eastern Europe; Churchill, England & the rest of the world wondered: What will Russia do? There was no knowing. I mention this as we arrive at **ch24**, not because it deals with Churchill, Hitler or Russia but just like the Russia of 1939, this chapter presents to us a series of **puzzles**, things that are just **unknowable** & for some; that can be **disconcerting**.

Ch24 deals with a census of Israel's fighting capacity taken by Joab & his captains at the behest of their king (**1-10**). By all appearances, the census seems to be **senseless** (**Joab's view [3]**); not just senseless but **sinful** (**David's view [10]**), not just sinful but **punishable** (**YAHWEH's view [15]**). It's easy to see that the census was **senseless, sinful** & punishable the puzzle comes when we ask why it was so. Why was it sinful? What was so wrong with counting?

There are 2 answers. The 1st is easiest: **it doesn't matter**. The 2nd answer: there are 4 views. Since we all now want to know, let's look quickly at them. **1) Josephus** follows Jewish tradition & says David failed to **pay the atonement \$** required per person when a census is taken (**Ex 30**). But, if **Ex 30** was a 1 time deal & not instituted again until long after David's time, there could be no fault for David in this area. **2)** The sin lay in David's **motivation** for the census; that David **aspired to self-sufficiency** thru this census. **3)** Some point to the military nature of the census & conclude that David is preparing for further military conquests that are ill-conceived or well outside of **YAHWEH's** perfect will. Finally, **4)** Some believe David just wanted to know Israel's military capabilities for the future, equaling a tacit **denial of YAHWEH's promise** to multiply Israel like the stars of the sky. In this case, **human planning replaces divine promise**.

Of course, none of these explanations fit the bill because **ch24** doesn't explicitly tell us **why** the census was wrong. Thus, we can only assume that this matter doesn't matter. The census was wrong but we **don't need to**

know why it was.

What we **do** need to know is: what exactly **does** this chapter teach us about God & His dealings with man.

1- Having addressed 1 puzzle, **vs1** confronts us with an even greater mystery! Forget about discovering the sin in the census; we now see its only because **YAHWEH** was angry with Israel “**again**” & wanted to bring judgment against them. So David gives the order & Joab balks, which should tell us something. If the census bothered Joab, there must have been something terribly wrong with it because Joab wasn't known for having a tender conscience. Despite his objections (& **his men**), David overruled & Joab & Co went out to canvas the countryside – counting heads & taking names.

Talk about a puzzle! Having read this, immediately our minds focus on the **mechanics** of God's wrath: how can **YAHWEH** stir up David to carry out an action for which he is then held guilty? Many a scholar chafe at this presumed accusation on **YAHWEH**'s character. If we look at the companion passage to our text in **I Chron 21:1** we'll see that it was actually Satan that incited David to take the census. Some might say that this proves we are really dealing with God's permissive will; Satan's the real culprit in all this, **YAHWEH** only permitted it. Now, both texts are true but appealing to God's permissive will doesn't solve anything. It may sound more pleasant but God still made the decision to permit it. We can't make Satan the whipping boy in order to avoid God's role in this.

There are other ways scholars attempt to soften **YAHWEH**'s responsibility in this; by tweaking the translation or the grammar but; instead of focusing on the **mechanics** of God's wrath (**methods**) I believe our authors means for us to focus on the **mystery of God's wrath**. How could David be blamed for doing what **YAHWEH** moved him to do? I have no idea, but it doesn't pay to twist the text just to escape a theological problem. The writer clearly presents **YAHWEH**'s role as a command in **vs1**, while David clearly realizes he has sinned in **vs10**. In the Hebrew thinking, whatever God permits, He commits. By allowing the census to be taken, God is viewed as having brought about the act.

David situation points to the mystery of God's wrath but there's a deeper mystery at work here than what we now see

YAHWEH's wrath burns against Israel. He's using David's sin as the vehicle to bring His wrath upon Israel. But why is **YAHWEH** angry with Israel? Again, we don't know! It could be for any number of reasons: it may be related to Saul's sin against the Gibeonites but hadn't the people recently rejected David, the covenant head of Israel for Absalom & then Sheba? These all may be plausible answers but the truth is we just don't know. The text is silent on that topic. It declares the fact of **YAHWEH**'s wrath but not the reason for it. In **ch24**, the reason for **YAHWEH**'s wrath is truly a mystery.

Does this bother you because; personally, I find it to be unsatisfactory. But, is this an honest response of my spirit or is it just a demanding response of my flesh? Maybe, down deep in our hearts, we expect God to always explain Himself & justify His ways. If that's the case, we're setting ourselves up for disappointment (**Job 9:10; Isa 55:9; Rom 11:33**).

If we have difficulty accepting the mystery of this text, it should alert us to a failure in our hearts. If we get upset over a text that tells us God is angry but doesn't tell us why, aren't we really saying we **don't trust** Him to be just? Is there a failure in us that insist there must be no mysteries in God? Do we subtly assume God owes us an explanation? See how easy it is to carry around an arrogance that refuses to worship; an attitude that comes into the presence of the Most High with a **strut** instead of a **bow**? Do we demand God be completely transparent? If so, we're not trusting!

10-19- Note: David felt convicted before the prophet arrived. Gad comes to give David direction **after** the king's confession & plea for forgiveness, not to bring him to repentance. Gad shows up & offers David, not 3 wishes but 3 options – none of them good. David gets to pick his own poison. David's reply in **vs14** effectively removes the 2nd option but appears to leave the remaining choice to **YAHWEH**. 3 days of plague it is! God brought that plague & it took 70K casualties (**really messed up those census totals**). But hey, David was dead right about **YAHWEH**'s mercies (**16**) the plague was stopped before it reached Jerusalem, this is nothing but the **wonder of God's mercy**.

Note: while the exercising of **YAHWEH**'s wrath on Israel in **vs15** is the **central focus** of the **ch24**, it is literally surrounded by **YAHWEH**'s mercy: **vs14**, David expresses **trust** in **YAHWEH**'s mercy; **vs16**, **YAHWEH demonstrates** His mercy. This catches the tone of the chapter: wrath wrapped in mercy. That's what makes David's statement in **vs14** so

wonderful. He knows he's about to meet **YAHWEH's** dreadful wrath but He is still fully convinced of **YAHWEH's** freely given mercies. Somehow David understands that the hand that will **strike** him will also **spare** him. His assumptions are astounding! See how well he knows his God! In the midst of his crisis, his theology seems to come out as if by reflex. Isn't this how it should be for believers? Shouldn't we have our best theology ready for our darkest moments? Whether in sin or disaster, is there any better place to fall than into the hands of the Lord?

Often times, we tend to look upon God's mercy as a divine exception instead of as the divine character. "I **don't deserve it this time.**" When did you ever deserve it? David didn't harbor such doubts. Even when God's wrath was staring him down, he still trusted in – still counted on God's mercies, "**The Lord's mercies ...are new every morning**" This is a believer who has a grip on mercy – or rather, mercy has a grip on him!

20-25- Now, back in **vs16** we see that David was right about **YAHWEH's** mercy. As the destroying angel turns his attention to Jerusalem, God puts the disaster "on hold." This was mercy restraining wrath. The angel was at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite when the Lord told him to "stand down." Gad then tells David to erect an altar to **YAHWEH** at that location; David then obeyed Gad's order, which was technically **YAHWEH's** command. So, if building the altar was a response to **YAHWEH's** command, then the sacrifices offered there must also have been required. This means that the situation was **not resolved** at the end of **vs16**. Wrath was stayed but it was not satisfied. The plague ceased in **vs16** but the **wrath** behind the plague could not just be "put on hold" it had to be dealt with (**propitiated**). Thus, the altar & sacrifices of **vs25** point to the **necessity of atonement**.

When Araunah looks up & sees the king & all his entourage heading his way, he asks the logical question: "**What'ch y'all doing here?**" David gives a logical answer: "**I'm here to buy your threshing floor & build an altar so the plague can be over & done with for good!**" There's a clear link here between the required sacrifices & a definite conclusion to the plague, which was just the expression of **YAHWEH's** wrath which cannot be avoided or averted, only satisfied.

Araunah graciously offers David all the things necessary to make this happen, free of charge. But David's not having it. He insists on paying a full,

fair price for the floor, the oxen & the wooden implements. Why? Because David knew if he accepted this offer, it would be Araunah's sacrifice, not David's & as such, it would not have satisfied **YAHWEH**'s wrath. David knew it couldn't be a gift or a sacrifice to the Lord if it didn't cost him something. To his credit, David wasn't looking for the cheapest possible way to please God – he was looking for the most effective way: **total surrender!** “**He who has a religion that costs him nothing has a religion that is worth nothing**” (**Clarke**). Love is the costliest of all undertakings. David weighs out the 50 shekels of silver, builds the altar & offers up burnt offerings & peace offerings. Only then do things change. Only then does **YAHWEH** answer prayers on behalf of the land. Only then was the plague on Israel stopped. This too was mercy all around. Not only did God in His mercy restrain His wrath (16) but God in mercy also provided a way for removing His wrath, thru the work of the atoning sacrifice.

Now, you would think that after 70K died in Israel, **YAHWEH**'s wrath would be satisfied but clearly it wasn't. David understood that the deaths of 70K Israelites could never atone for his sin. Atonement could only be made thru the blood of an **approved substitute**. Yet, there are millions of people around this world in many different religions who are attempting to satisfy God's just wrath against their sin by doing good works, by giving to their religion or by simply living a good, “moral” life. None of these things fit the bill when it comes to atoning for sin. You see, God only accepts the blood of an approved substitute to atone for sin & the only approved substitute for our sin is Jesus! **II Cor 5:21** says it best. God doesn't command us to build an altar & offer sacrifices for our sin – He provided His own altar where His wrath was quenched & our guilt was atoned for. That's the greatest mystery of all – the **mystery of God's love** for sinful man & the great lengths to which He was willing to go, to reconcile us back to Him.

God's wrath against your sin was let loose on Jesus while He hung on the cross. He endured the necessary punishment; He paid the necessary price for all our sin. He did it all because He loved us. He did it because He was the only acceptable sacrifice; He was the only approved substitute who could stand in our place & thank God, He did!

Vs25 says David offered **burnt offerings** & **peace offerings**. The order is deliberate: burnt offerings were required to atone for sins while peace offerings allowed the worshipper to enjoy fellowship with God. That order

still applies today – it is impossible to enjoy the peace of fellowship with God until you have 1st addressed you need for salvation from sin. It's impossible to have your sins atoned for without first accepting Jesus Christ as your Savior.☺