

2ND SAMUEL

Week 37, chapters 23, 24

We're not quite going to complete our study of 2nd Samuel today, but we will next week. I imagine when we started it you didn't expect that we'd spend almost 11 months in it. Besides the awesome spiritual truths contained here (and in the books of the Kings that we'll start in a couple of weeks) there are tremendous practical lessons and much salient Biblical history that allows us to better comprehend the words of the Prophets and the reasons for the timing of their oracles; and these studies prepare us to understand the New Testament in the light it was truly meant to be understood.

As I've said on numerous occasions: the Old Testament is the indispensable foundation of the New. You cannot reasonably hope to understand the New Testament without knowledge of the Old because the New Testament assumes that you already have that knowledge base. After all, the entire Bible was written in a Hebrew cultural context and essentially meant to be read by Hebrews. Therefore the New Testament doesn't explain how the concept of why a king was needed in Israel or how events led to the advent of King Saul, it doesn't explain what the Law is, it doesn't explain what sacrifice or atonement or priesthood is, it doesn't go into detail over God's many attributes, it doesn't repeat the commandments of God or the many prophecies that point towards Messiah; rather we are expected to already be familiar with those matters of what generally was common knowledge among the Israelites.

Most of us are gentiles who have been graciously invited by the Lord to join ourselves (by means of faith in the Jewish Messiah Jesus the Christ) into a series of covenants between God and the Hebrews. So while with some personal effort and helpful direction we can certainly comprehend the entire Bible, it won't come by ignoring the first two-thirds of it, or skipping over the hard parts, or thinking that somehow we can approach the Bible as though it was an Anglo-Saxon document created by enlightened Western Europeans.

Thus when a worshipper of **Yeshua HaMashiach** skips over the Hebrew Bible and goes directly to the **B'rit Hadashah**, the New Testament, we will get some strange ideas of what is being said in the Gospels and especially in Paul's (often difficult) letters.

So let's start off today by completing 2nd Samuel chapter 23 and the listing of David's main warriors and officers. I'm not going to re-read these verses (as we read through it last week) as they are rather tedious and full of tongue-twisting names, many of which are even questionable as a result of a slew of copyist errors over the centuries. So open your Bibles to 2nd Samuel 23:8 and follow along with me as we move at a goodly pace over this list.

I mentioned last time that the list was divided into 3 distinct groups, each group representing a rank or position in a chain of command; the 1st group is the highest rank, the 3rd group is the lowest rank. Of course we're talking about rank in relative terms and all of the listed men were commanders and leaders, and only the most important ones were recorded as there were hundreds more of them. And the top general, Joab, is also omitted either because David didn't much care for him or because the idea was merely to list everyone below the chief commander who didn't get much recognition anywhere else in Hebrew documents.

We need to address right up front that this same list appears in expanded form in 1Chronicles 11, and the Chronicles list is a bit different in that there are more names. Interestingly the somewhat parallel one in 1Chronicles 11 is followed by another list in the following chapter and it consists of those who joined in with David before he became king and while he was still fleeing from the murderous and paranoid King Saul. And then there is even a 3rd list of men (also in chapter 12 of 1Chronicles) that are the "leaders of those mobilized for the army, who came to David at Hebron to transfer Saul's kingship over to him (David)". So it seems as though we might have 4 different periods of David's life that these various lists cover; however not all scholars agree with that premise.

Recall that we are exploring a portion of 2nd Samuel that is generally labeled as an appendix that is kind of a catch-all of miscellaneous information from during David's reign that some ancient editor thought needed to be added for posterity's sake. The reality is that since the Bible doesn't give us calendar dates and pays little attention to the precise time and order of events, there is necessarily substantial speculation by later scholars of just what time period each of these lists is referring to. And since at first this historical information was handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation, and only later put to pen, it is clear that at times there were slightly differing traditions that developed and so some details between the traditions was remembered slightly differently. So rather than our joining in with the various speculations about these lists we'll just take a brief overview of what is actually written and reasonably verifiable.

The chief at the top of the list is **Yoshev-Bashevet the Tach'kmoni**; he was apparently #1 among them all (but of course below Joab). He was also known as **Adino the Etzni** we're told. We know that **Yoshev-Bashevet** is some kind of spelling corruption and so we find an entirely different name for him in 1Chronicles: **Yashov'am**. His claim to fame was that he killed 800 men in a single encounter. This does NOT mean that he single handedly killed 800 men or that 800 men is a precise body count. Rather he was in charge of a battle where about 800 of the enemy were killed and he, too, fought valiantly as an example of bravery to his men.

Verse 9 begins, "After him", and then says Eleazar son of Dodo. "After him" means next in status or rank so Eleazar reported to **Yashov'am**. He is remembered for bravely standing against the Philistines, outmanned, and fighting so hard and with such stamina and dedication that his hand cramped in a death grip around the shank of his sword (much like a bird of prey's claws involuntarily spring closed on its victim and is unable to relax its hold until a certain amount of time goes by and his talons naturally release).

"After him" (3rd in line of command) was **Shammah** son of **Age**. He was especially remembered for protecting a field of lentils from the Philistines. In other words, as was usual for an invader, one of the first things the Philistines went for was their enemy's food supply. Interestingly the place where this happened was **Lechi**, the same place that Samson also had a famous altercation with the Philistines as reported in Judges 15. This was where the petulant Hebrew strongman slew many Philistines soldiers with only the jawbone of an ass.

Starting in verse 13 we get a famous story whereby 3 of David's war heroes overheard David saying how much he desired to have a sip of water from a well in his hometown of Bethlehem (a well apparently known for its sweet clarity). This occurred at a time when David was hiding out at the Cave of Adullam, after he had left the territory of the Philistine King of Gath. Many of the disaffected Judahites of the region who hated Saul heard that David was there and came and joined his militia. The Philistines had set up a camp not far away at the Valley of Rephaim, and the 3 Israelite warriors who heard David's longing for this water fought their way past the Philistines, journeyed to Bethlehem, retrieved the water, fought their way back through the Philistines, and gave the water to David.

The Rabbis say that David never actually requested the water; at an idle time he merely reminisced about the wonderful tasting water from a certain well in the city of his birth. His soldiers surprised him by their courageous (if not foolhardy) action of braving the enemy and bringing it to him. But upon receiving this precious gift so dearly won, David refused to drink it! Instead he poured it out to God, as a kind of drink offering (a libation offering). And then said that to drink that water would be as though he was drinking the blood of those 3 warriors.

There is no record of an altar at the Cave of Adullam and almost certainly there was none there; so David wasn't making any kind of formal offering to God. David's rationale is actually quite sound; his men had risked their lives to get for David something as trivial as water that tasted better than the water they had readily available. Nicer tasting water is not worth endangering life. Since life was in the blood, and the men had risked their blood to obtain the water, then it would as though David was drinking their blood if he drank that water that had been needlessly attained at such a potentially high cost (it probably cost the lives of at least a few Philistines). And therefore he poured it out onto the ground as a sign of refusal to do wrong before Yehoveh. Unfortunately this is not a pious side of David that we would see too often after he became king over Israel and Judah.

Verse 18 begins the listing of the 2nd rank of warrior heroes, and first listed among that group is **Avishai** who is David's nephew through David's sister **Tz'ruyah**. **Avishai** is Joab's brother (Joab is David's General of the Army). Another of this rank is **B'nayah**. The Rabbis say that although we're told at the end of verse 17 that the 2nd rank consists of 3 men, only two are listed (at least in the surviving documents as we have them today). Some think the 3rd hero was probably **Asahel**, the brother of Avishai and Joab, who was killed by Abner. I suppose this is possible, but we do find Asahel listed as the 1st name of the 3rd rank of heroes, so I have my doubts. I also think it's important to note that there is no implication in this list that the men who are listed were still alive at the time the list was compiled. In every case these lists are looking back in time; so in the same way we can have a valid list of all the United States Presidents we can do so without regard to whether they are still living because that's not the point of the list.

Avishai held the highest status of this 2nd group consisting of himself, **B'nayah** and possibly **Asahel**. His most heroic moment is remembered as the time that he killed 300 men. Again, like with the leader of the 1st rank (**Yashov'am**) it's not claiming that he single handedly killed 300 men, but rather he led the battle and was himself especially valiant and courageous in victory. Who that enemy was that they battled against we're not told.

For some reason **B'nayah** is given quite a bit of attention; probably because he was a trusted favorite of David and led David's personal bodyguard. Interestingly 1Chronicles explains that **B'nayah's** father **Y'hoyada** was a priest, so we can reasonably assume that **B'nayah** was a Levite and so being a warrior and the king's chief bodyguard is an unusual occupation for him until we consider that the Priesthood was barely functional in these days and the Levites were forced to find other lines of work. The stories that were chosen to best characterize **B'nayah** are of his killing 2 men from Moab, a lion in a pit, and a large Egyptian man. No doubt the first two mentioned exploits were chosen because of the common theme of being involved

with a lion.

That is, despite the many Biblical translation renderings of verse 20 about the nature of these 2 Moabite men, the CJB does probably the best job by explaining them as “lion hearted”. The reason is that the Hebrew word used is **ari'el**, which means “lion of El”. Lion however is simply **ari** in Hebrew; but the original Hebrew in this passage adds the word “El” (El is the highest god of any nation’s gods). So the words “hearted” or “men” don’t exist in this verse; rather they are added by translators as a means to get to the sense of the verse. The Hebrew is actually **ari'el Moav**, most literally meaning “lions of Moab’s El”. It is assumed from the context then that it is speaking of men (warriors on behalf of Moab’s El) and not a pair of lions.

However in the next verse where **B'nayah** kills a lion in a pit, it is indeed the Hebrew word **ari** (a lion, the animal lion). So these two verses together form a kind of memorable play on words so common in ancient oral tradition. In the first case this is about killing an enemy on the battlefield, and in the second case we are apparently dealing with a hungry lion that has been driven into a village during a snowy winter and thus is willing to take unusual risks to find food. Unlucky, he falls into somebody’s water cistern but obviously can’t remain there. The brave **B'nayah** is called to scene and he kills the dangerous cat. So we have a tradition created whereby **B'nayah** shows himself fearless against man and beast; the ultimate Middle Eastern warrior-hero.

Then finally he fights what is essentially a giant. But rather than the more typical **Philistine** giant this one is an Egyptian. And just as David used only a shepherd’s sling to kill Goliath and then beheaded him with the Philistine giant’s own weapon, so **B'nayah** uses only a stick to disarm the Egyptian giant and then kills him with his own spear. One also remembers David’s famous encounter with a lion (as with **B'nayah**), and even that David became known as the Lion of Judah. No wonder David chose this man to be the chief of his personal royal guard even over his own family members! But one cannot also help but wonder how much of **B'nayah’s** legendary exploits was shaped for just this kind of David-connection. It would have been perfectly normal for that era to exaggerate a bit for effect.

In this long list of the 3rd rank are some familiar names. One name of importance is **Eliam** who was Bathsheba’s father; and along with him is listed Achitofel, Bathsheba’s grandfather. The list even includes the ill-fated **Uriyah** the Hittite, Bathsheba’s husband, whom David had murdered. I think when we see the high status of **Eliam** and **Uriyah** such that they are assigned hero warrior status, it only adds to David’s depravity and selfishness that he would show such disrespect by having illicit sex with **Eliam’s** daughter and then having another valuable warrior leader, **Uriyah, Eliam’s** son in law assassinated for no other reason that

David wanted Uriyah's wife as his own. David didn't desire Bathsheba because of some kind of important alliance or political move that in the long run might be beneficial for Israel; it was because he was entranced with her beauty and only wanted her in order to satisfy his sexual thirst. That her husband, father and grandfather were some of David's closest advisors and loyal war commanders apparently meant nothing to him.

Let's move on to final chapter of 2nd Samuel.

READ 2ND SAMUEL CHAPTER 24 all

Let me comment immediately that we're going to see a great deal of figurative speech concerning the Lord in these passages. That is we see intense human emotions ascribed to Yehoveh; and we must be aware that even the greatest and most ancient Hebrew Sages spoke eloquently that anger, jealousy, sadness, joy, etc., when applied to God are merely figures of speech. As physical creatures we are quite limited in thought and vocabulary on how to characterize the nature of God's divine decisions and actions. And we have no other means to communicate about those decisions and actions other than to describe them in common human terms.

Thus the first word of this chapter is (in English) "anger" and interestingly that is not the literal wording of this opening phrase. Rather it says that Yehoveh's nostrils (His **aph**) burned; so that figurative speech I warned you about is even more figurative than it appears on the surface. Burning nostrils is, of course, a figurative Middle Eastern expression indicating extreme anger. But it is important to note that this severe divine dissatisfaction is the context for all that is going to happen.

Thus the census and God's anger are inseparable in this story. What we must also notice as we look back upon what we've learned from the Hebrew Bible to this point is that invariably God's anger is provoked by sin, which we could define as the disobedience of His people or the mistreatment of His people by those who are not-His-people. The ancient Jewish Sages (who tend to have a ready answer for every obscure thing in the Bible) are flummoxed by this opening verse. And it is because there is no reason given for God's high level of anger against His people, Israel. There is no end to the speculation of what it might be, and we will consider of couple of possibilities, but this side of heaven we'll never know for sure.

Of the many views on this subject a couple stand out. One is that whatever the nation's sin, it must have been invisible to David or he would not have permitted such a thing to happen. Thus chief among the unspoken hidden sins that might have caused the problem is that the people didn't beseech David to build a Temple. Had they done so it would have been built during David's and not Solomon's time, and God's Ark of the Covenant would not have resided unceremoniously in a make-shift tent for decades while the Israelites lived in permanent homes.

Another line of thought is more practical; it is that God's wrath was the result of the rebellion of Sheva that had gone unpunished. And such lack of punishment was all the more terrible because the people were severely punished for Absalom's rebellion and then turned right around and rebelled against God's anointed again not long afterward. Usually the parallel account of the last couple of chapters of 2nd Samuel that appears in 1Chronicles fills in some gaping holes for us and answers questions; but not in this case. 1Chronicles is equally silent on the nature of David's trespass in ordering a census. I don't advocate for any particular solution for the exact reason for God's anger first against Israel and then against David the resulted from this census. However in the matter of David's census and the punishment that came as a result of it, there is a rather innovative possibility that a modern Christian scholar has come up with that I think is at least worthy of consideration because it explains the matter in the context of violated Torah principles. We'll talk about that when we get there.

But first let's straighten out a common misconception about the very first verse. It is usually worded such that we have Yehoveh deciding to take out His wrath on His people by directly instructing David to go and take a census of the people; that's not really what is meant here. What is meant is that God incited David to do something wrong and hurtful to the people of Israel and that the thought that David came up with was to order a census. What is so wrong about a census is itself not so straightforward, but next week we'll take a stab at it.

The idea is that God did with David what He had done at times with Saul and even with Pharaoh; He led them and incited them to do something that would harm the Israelites. We often like to invoke our Christian-eze and in a sweeping statement say that God does not ever override our free will or that God would never incite anyone to do evil. Well this passage concerning David is but one of several in the Bible that refutes that notion. More often than not when God wants to punish His people He'll use someone or some nation to do it. In other words only rarely is the punishment of God's people a cosmic supernatural event (like in the destruction of Sodom). The Lord used the Emperor of Assyria to punish the northern kingdom of Israel. He used Nebuchadnezzar to punish the southern kingdom of Judah. He used Cyrus of Persia to punish the people who overly-punished His people, and so on. Thus we saw in 2nd

Samuel that often David regarded the defeats and calamities of war or domestic trouble in his kingdom or family as simply the action of God punishing him using men as His earthly proxies. And I think this is a God-principle that hasn't changed one iota even since the advent of Yeshua.

Thus as regards verse 1, it is not God saying to David, "Go do a census", rather it is David relaying a thought that came to his mind, in response to God's excitement of David's evil inclination, by saying to his military commander, "Go do a census". Now you may question where I can come up with this line of reasoning but if we go to the parallel account of this event in 1Chronicles 21:1, we find these words:

^{CJB} **1 Chronicles 21:1** *The Adversary now rose up against Isra'el and incited David to take a census of Isra'el.*

So in 2nd Samuel 24 God incites David, but in 1Chronicles 21 it is the Adversary that rises up in David. Most Bible versions will not say Adversary but rather Satan. Satan is a Hebrew word that means adversary, and only late in history did it ever become a proper name for the devil. Remember what I told you at the outset of this chapter: we're going to see a lot of figurative speech. And the author of these verses is trying to find the words (where there are no words) to explain how David's physical action was spiritually caused, and yet it was an evil action that took its cue from David's own thoughts (this is pretty mysterious stuff that we Believers contend with even today).

The answer lies in the principle of the **yetzer harah**, the evil inclination that resides within all humans alongside the good inclination (**yetzer tov**). Our good inclinations are where godly and righteous thoughts occur; our evil inclinations are where our bad and wrong thoughts occur. With redemption we have the capacity to bring our evil inclinations under Holy Spirit control, but we still often fail because underneath it all we still LIKE and give-in to our evil inclinations. That failure to control our evil inclination causes us to sin. And that is basically what is happening here with David. He's not being influenced by Yehoveh to do anything outside of his normal character; it's just that the Lord is going to use that bad side of David (the **yetzer harah** where Satan hangs out) as a vehicle to bring just punishment to the people of Israel.

Thus David calls his general of the army, **Yo'av**, and tells him to count the people. Interestingly

David puts it in terms of counting Israel and Judah. Even though Israel is theoretically a unified kingdom under David in reality Israel and Judah are two separate entities being ruled over by one king. At least that's how they see themselves. Further, when David says to "Go" and take a census, what it literally says is to "go around". In Hebrew the word be translated is **shut**, it is unique word not found often in the Bible but one place that it is found and rightfully offers a good parallel to get the correct sense of it is in the Book of Job. Job 1:7 says:

^{CJB} **Job 1:7 ADONAI asked the Adversary, "Where are you coming from?" The Adversary answered ADONAI, "From roaming through the earth, wandering here and there."**

Where it says "roaming" in the CJB, other versions will say "to and fro", and still others "going around". These are all attempts to translate **shut**. But what we find is that in the same way that a Hebrew word for darkness is **choshek, choshek** is not a benign form of darkness but rather an evil form of darkness. Thus the Hebrew word **shut** (going around, roaming) isn't a benign stroll but rather carries with it an ominous evil undertone. So right away we know that when David says to **shut** (go around) and carry out a census, this is not going to be good and what he is doing is going to lead to big trouble.

Now David's military commander Joab, whose reputation is certainly not that of a cautious or upright man, understands that politically speaking performing a census of the people is a provocative act on David's part and nothing good can come from it. So he comes to David and questions his order to perform a census.

We'll continue this and finish up the Book of 2nd Samuel next week.