

WHAT A CHOICE!

Here is this short but intriguing account tucked away in First Chronicles about the time King David ordered a census to be taken. According to the story, it was not really David's idea; it was Satan that cooked it up. But no matter. David went along with the temptation, so he is still guilty, and Israel will suffer for it.

I know this does not go along with our present ideas of "justice," but in the olden days, people just assumed that if the leader made a mistake, the people would suffer for it. I am not sure the fact that we dislike the idea makes it any less true.

What was wrong with David wanting to count the people, anyway? How else could he know how much revenue to expect or how many soldiers he could call up if he needed them? How could he plan if he did not have some basic information? It is hard for us to understand that this could be such a serious sin.

As near as we can tell, it was considered a form of rebelliousness or lack of trust to count the people. Even though David is king, he is not supposed to make the plans. He is supposed to find out what God wants done and then do it obediently. In fact, the king's task is to lead the whole people into obediently doing what God wants done. So David does not need to know how many soldiers he can muster; if he goes to battle only at the Lord's command, then the Lord will bring the victory and the numbers do not matter (as Israel indeed proved many, many times). And David does not need to know how much revenue he can count on; it will be sufficient as long as God is in charge and the people are faithful.

So this counting of the people is either an act of insurrection or a lack of faith, or both. Either way, David would not be interested in the statistics if he were not contemplating doing some of the planning himself – that is, taking matters into his *own* hands. If the king does that, then the people are no longer under God's care and protection. David has broken the chain of command – the line of authority. Once that happens, the people are only under the care and protection of one feeble, human man.

And Joab does not like it! Neither do the other leaders. But they will still follow David's orders. After all, just because David

is disobedient is no excuse for *them* to be disobedient. They are not so much worried about David's wrath as they are about God's wrath. David is still God's king – the anointed – whether he is acting like it at this moment or not. Unless God takes away the kingship (as God took it away from Saul), David must be obeyed. Otherwise there would be anarchy, with everybody following his or her own plan. Then *nobody* could be saved. Israel's enemies would overwhelm her within a few months, and then no concerted or cooperative efforts could reveal Israel's allegiance to God and, thereby, God's providence and protection for Israel. Oh, God still had the power to protect them if God chose to do so, but "primitive" people reasoned: "Why should God protect that which does not belong to God?" And if they *did* belong to God, then by definition they also *obeyed* God. If they were not obedient, then by definition they must not belong to God, so why then should God protect them? Strange logic to our ears, but that is the way they thought.

This time David has grown careless or brash or maybe too big for his britches – momentarily. The real trouble surfaces when David realizes what he has done. In this instance, Scripture gives us little information about the awakening. Suddenly David is very remorseful, and he knows he better make amends fast.

The drama of anguish and uncertainty and dread is lost to us. We can read ahead and discover that it will take seventy thousand lives to clear up this episode. But David does not know what the cost will be. He just knows, with that terrible, sinking feeling, that he has blundered again and there will be hell to pay. Can any of you still identify? I hope we are not so sophisticated or asleep (or whatever it should be called) that we cannot identify with that.

David also knows, God love him, that the price can only get worse if he delays. He must clear up this guilt and get back to his proper place under God no matter what the cost. If not, the entire nation will disintegrate. Seventy thousand lives is a terrible price, but two million lives – and no heritage or promise left – is far, far worse.

Most of us might claim to know that God would never actually exact such a price – that God is so loving that as soon as David was sorry, God automatically forgave him. We should at least recognize that this would have seemed even more horrible to David and his

people than the loss they were about to sustain. It would have meant that obedience was not really important after all. It would have meant that the whole worship thing, the holy nation idea, the anointed king, and the promises were all a charade. Here, by David's apostasy, they had been out from under God's immediate protection and guidance for who knows how many months (at least nine months and twenty days, plus however long before the census started that David had been living in this attitude) – and there would be no repercussions?! There would be no breakdown of providence as a result? Such a thing was unthinkable. Such disobedience would set certain principles in motion, and time would inevitably bring them down upon the people.

David wakes up to his sin sooner than most folk do, however. He must seek forgiveness right away. Forgiveness will not stop the repercussions of what he has already done, but it will stop the damage at its present level, and it will set in motion new forces for a faithful comeback. Meanwhile, God is as lenient as possible. The effect of David's apostasy cannot be stopped, but neither has it fully materialized. So God gives David the choice of what form it will take. It's as if the results of the disobedience were already brewing but had not yet taken final form. David gets to choose:

- between three years, three months, or three days
- between drought, human enemies having their day, or God's direct punishment
- between nature, people, and God
- between a slow, long, drawn-out punishment; a tough and demoralizing punishment; or a blitz, be-done-with-it, get-it-over-with punishment

WHAT A CHOICE! Have you ever had to make such a choice?

There is no way to come to this story without crossing a lot of time barriers, language barriers, cultural barriers, and framework-of-thought barriers. We do not have to believe that taking a census is evil, but we do have to know that they thought it was. And even if we assume that, for us, counting the people is not an act of insurrection against God, we can recognize our own struggles with pride, rebelliousness, and insurrection toward God. So this incident is still important.

The biggest barrier, I suspect, is our raised hackles over God punishing people – especially seventy thousand dead – over this issue. More to the point, some of us (including me) are extra-sensitive to a picture of God as cruel and vengeful. It is terribly difficult for us to read passages like this and not read all the “dark ages” thinking back into them, especially when so much “dark age” Christianity is rampant again today.

Nevertheless, we sometimes simply overreact. One extreme is seldom better than its opposite. If we rebel against our parents too strongly, we still never get free; we simply do everything the opposite of what they taught us. We are still just as controlled, only it is inverted. We are still in the same prison, only inverted. So the reaction against fundamentalism is to insist that there is no divine justice, that there are no repercussions for sin, and that God never has *anything* to do with whatever goes on here. That is the same prison, only inverted. If God hates and punishes us or if God leaves us entirely alone, it comes to the same lost, meaningless, hopeless end.

Every time you read a Scripture passage about people dying because God’s justice is at work, does it send up red flares all over your inner landscape? Some of us get uppity, angry, and resentful, and a glaze comes over our eyes. David and his people thought God was in charge of all things. If someone died, they assumed it must be God’s plan working. Why are we so afraid of that? If people die and it has no meaning whatsoever, does that please us better?

We sow our seeds and later reap what we sow. Is that God’s reward and punishment, or is that just the law of nature? If God is the Creator and Author of nature, is it not two ways of saying the same thing?

Anyway, no matter how you cut it, God is going to kill off about five billion of us in the next eighty years or so (and the way things are going, it may be ten billion). That is the way this place is designed and that is what happens here. Who is to blame except the Creator? Yet we do not believe God is personally cruel; God has reasons for this design and for our experience here. Or so we believe, by faith. But let’s not be squeamish either, like so many others who just don’t want to think about such things because this part of life *bothers* them.

A man returned from an extended trip abroad and discovered that a good friend of his had contracted cancer and was not expected to live beyond a year. He went to visit him in the cancer ward and was surprised to find him in rather jovial spirits, laughing and seeming to show a very close bond with the other patients in the ward. When they were alone, the man asked his friend, "How do you stand it so well? I thought this place would be all gloom and doom, but find instead an atmosphere more pleasant than I've known for months. Isn't it terrible knowing, you know, what all of you know?"

"We have our bad times," said his friend. "But probably not like you think. All of us are dying, including you. Some of us know it and admit it. Some of us don't. That's the only difference. A few of us have been told we may beat this thing – we may walk out of here and surprise all the doctors. But we realize now that even that will not last. We are all dying. It's no reason not to enjoy whatever life we are given for as long as we have it."

Just so, some of us learn to trust God in all things and some of us do not. Life is a gift – it is not an inalienable right.

Now to summarize today's passage:

1.) Every time we take power into our own hands – decide to live our lives without conscious obedience to God – we are like King David in this story. Whether it is raising children, taking a job, getting married, mapping out a course in school, going on a trip – *anything* we do without awareness that our primary responsibility is to obey God, we are like King David in this story.

2.) When we take life into our own hands like that, it means we have set in motion principles of alienation and anarchy. We probably intended no overt evil. In fact, we were overeager and overanxious to accomplish something good (just like David was). Nevertheless, we have set in motion themes and principles that do not have worship and obedience at their center. It will take them some time to gather momentum, but eventually they will surface. If we have never noticed our apostasy and repented, then when the wave comes it will sweep away our faith and hope and all that we value, at least for a while. I am not talking about theory; I am saying that, like with David, this has been our experience – this is the way life really is for us. Is that not so?

3.) Somewhere along the line, God seems to have asked each one of us what form of correction we would prefer: the three-year type, the three-month type, or the three-day type. What a choice! Yet somehow it seems clear that we have each had the same terrible choice that David had. Our life-lessons keep coming in the mode we have chosen. I am told we can change the choice and get a different mode if we really want to, but we cannot just decide to skip the correction. That is not one of the options in this world.

A.) So some of us choose the drought. That is, we prefer our medicine to be slow and drawn-out. It also means we choose to have it come from impersonal “nature.” Events over which we have no control are able to control us. We project our problems onto statistics, economic trends, the world market, the company policy, or the accident or flood or fad that spoiled things for us.

Three years is so long, and then it takes another year or two to recover from the famine; by that time, more lessons have put us into another drought. So people who choose this first way get cynical, worn down, terribly depressed. It feels like fate is against them. But while they never seem to get rid of their troubles, neither are they suddenly overwhelmed. That’s part of the deal. The correction is steady, long, slow, and drawn-out.

B.) Some of us choose the three-month variety: being harried by other people – the enemies having their day against us. We prefer our medicine to be a little more direct. It makes it tough and is demoralizing, but we also get some breaks in between sieges.

In this second mode, we get our lessons from relationships rather than from impersonal events. We project our problems onto other people who then manipulate or dominate or persecute or betray us. Or maybe they just compete and win. In any case, any relationship will do, and most of them get into the act eventually. Spouse, business associates, friends, relatives – any relationship can suddenly turn into a new source of distress. As long as this is the mode we have chosen, all our relationships will eventually get into the act. People come into our lives to act out the roles and the lessons we do not want to face inside ourselves. That’s what the three-month mode is all about.

C.) A few bold folk, like King David, choose the three-day option. They want the full brunt of their errors right now – the whole thing. Get it over with. No matter how severe, take the whole load. Then, if we survive, at least it will not keep messing up the rest of life. We can break clean and go on to new opportunities and possibilities.

Such people put it all back onto God. That is, they project their problems back onto their interior spiritual development – their relationship with God. And they say, “I can’t make it without God anyway, so that has to get right before I can go on, no matter what it takes.”

For this third mode, all problems are perceived to be a spiritual crisis. It is not nature’s fault. It is not a string of accidents or unfair circumstances. It is not the way we or the things around us are made. Nor is it primarily other people’s fault; other people have their problems and hang-ups, but that is not the secret of our own problems. The challenge is within: it is part of the Life-Path – part of our own spiritual pilgrimage.

Knowing this, the lessons may come harder, as there is no place to drain off the guilt or the blame. But in the presence of God, the sins and the blunders can be dealt with directly and we are free to go on to other things. At least the Scripture passage assumes that King David chose wisely and faithfully, despite the terror of such a choice (three years, three months, or three days): *“This is a desperate plight I am in; let me fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is very great, and let me not fall into the hands of man.”*

By the way, I forgot to tell you the reason this story is told and remembered. It was in the process of handling this punishment that David found the location for the altar that would one day be built within Solomon’s temple. He not only got himself realigned, but God showed him the proper energy center for the whole Jewish nation. It was to become the focal point of their corporate worship and obedience for generations. God’s punishment is like that. After it’s over, looking back, we wouldn’t trade it for anything.