

February 22, 2023, Ash Wednesday
Count on It: David

1 Chronicles 21:1–2, 7–19, 26–27

King David is the great monarch of Israel’s history. He wasn’t the first king—that was Saul—but David established the kingdom, which would last for centuries. He followed the Lord, wrote many psalms, and was called a man after God’s own heart.

During this Lenten season, we’ll meet the good kings of Judah who sat on the throne of David in Jerusalem. The lives and deeds of these kings are written in 2 Chronicles, whose text we’ll read over the coming weeks. It’s fitting, then, as we begin with Ash Wednesday, to consider from 1 Chronicles the forerunner of the royal house.

Of course, although he was the archetypical good king of Judah, David was far from perfect. Not only his great deeds, but also his sins, are famously large and had far-reaching consequences. You are familiar with his adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of her husband, Uriah.

His repentance for these sins was the occasion of Psalm 51: ***“For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me”*** (Psalm 51:3).

This evil had significant ramifications for the rest of David’s reign. It led to the rebellion of David’s son Absalom, whose attempted coup destabilized the kingdom David had striven so hard to establish. When a nation experiences turmoil, opportunistic rivals look to press their advantage. Judah was no exception; David puts down the rebellion, fights the Philistines, and eventually survives another coup attempt.

The kingdom of Israel, and David’s reign, was in a delicate position. Like any savvy king, David wanted to know what his military strength was. Thus, he was tempted by Satan, who incited him to rely on the size of his army. He ordered a census of his fighting men so he could know from where his strength came. Like Scrooge McDuck or the king of “four-and-twenty blackbirds” fame counting all their money, David put his trust in the number of soldiers he could call for battle.

Certainly, we can sympathize with David. When we face uncertainty, we also tend to check the bank account and how our savings are going to hold up. If it's not money, we are still tempted to put our trust in things of this world. Our health, friends, or position in our social and professional groups are our fallbacks. We may look to political leaders or the American economy or military for comfort in uncertainty.

While we might think an unauthorized census isn't a great moral evil, both Satan and God saw it that way—a gross violation of the First Commandment. Even David himself later calls it “*great evil*” (v 17). Indeed, when we lean on our own strength and understanding, it's not simply a faux pas or mistake; it *is* great evil. Our nature is deeply disordered to rely on ourselves, our possessions, things given to us by God instead of the God who gave them.

In the case of the king, the actions of one man can have national, even worldwide, repercussions. We will see throughout Chronicles that sins of the king are visited on his people.

The Lord, through the prophet Gad, offers David three choices of threes: three years of famine, three months of losing war, or three days of pestilence. A price will be paid in blood; what a terrible choice for a king to make! Israel had already endured three years of famine during the days of David, and David knew war. No matter what the choice, the burden of David's sin will fall on his people.

David pleaded for the people: ***“Was it not I who gave command to number the people? It is I who have sinned and done great evil. But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand, O Lord my God, be against me and against my father's house. But do not let the plague be on your people”*** (v 17). The king who began his life as a shepherd had led his people into slaughter when he should have protected them.

Presented with these options, David refuses to make the choice. He will submit himself to God's wrath. ***“I am in great distress. Let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is very great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man”*** (v 13). Recognizing God's goodness in spite of his sin, David chooses to fall into the hand of the Lord.

Indeed, there is no better position for the penitent than to put himself at the mercy of God Almighty. As the catechism instructs us, *“We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment”* (SC, Fifth Petition).

We pray for mercy and grace not because we deserve them but because our Father has asked us to pray thus. David, and by extension the people of Israel, must be taught that armies and the strength of men come and go as God pleases.

Surely the punishment was very great, as seventy thousand men of Israel were killed by the plague over just a few days, likely not counting women and children.

That’s approximately twenty thousand more than the number of deaths during the three-day Battle of Gettysburg. So, David was forced to rely on the Lord for the strength of the nation.

When the angel reached Jerusalem, it was a great mercy that ***“the Lord saw, and he relented from the calamity. . . . Enough!”*** (v 15).

The angel’s hand was stayed. Yet David knew that payment of treasure and blood were required, so he bought the threshing floor of Ornan, oxen, wood, and grain. These offerings were answered by fire from heaven, and the angel sheathed his sword. We see that David’s choice to throw himself on the mercy of the Lord was wise. While David did not deserve mercy, he received it from the hand of God.

After this, “David said, ***‘Here shall be the house of the Lord God and here the altar of burnt offering for Israel’***” (22:1). This very site would become the place of Solomon’s temple, where blood was shed day after day and year after year for the sins of the people. However, all the blood of goats and bulls could not wash away the stain of sin. No sackcloth and ashes could cover the sinful flesh we bear. Israel relied, as we still do, on the great mercy of God to put away the sword.

Yet the sword could not always be sheathed; a victim was needed for payment. David’s price of six hundred shekels couldn’t repay even his debt, let alone the sin of the world.

The great king of Israel had brought destruction on his people that he was powerless to stop.

So it is that Israel waited for a greater king. Israel yearned for a king who would bring redemption, not destruction. When the Son of David entered Jerusalem, he was lauded as the King of Israel (John 12:13). From his Baptism in the Jordan until he entered Jerusalem on a colt, Jesus ***“took our illnesses and bore our diseases”*** (Matthew 8:17). Jesus had stayed the hand of death and even reversed its course. His innocent body carried our infirmities into the royal city.

This righteous King was anointed to bring good news to the poor and free the oppressed. Jesus saw the needs of his people and, like a shepherd, had compassion on them. He fed them out of the abundance of God’s grace and gathered them into one flock. Jesus did all this in obedience to God’s will and plan. He counted the cost of following the Lord and carried his cross to the end.

Even though he had no sin, Jesus saw that his people had fallen into every kind of sin and transgression. This time the King would have to die for his people, not vice-versa.

The terrible price of sin fell on the shepherd on account of the sheep. Outside Jerusalem, the King of the Judeans hanged for the sins of his people. The Son of David established the Kingdom of God's great mercy.

Death's hand was not stayed until the breath of the Son of God had departed. When the King declared, "*It is finished,*" he announced liberty from sin. When the King rose from the grave, death had lost its power. These things the Son of David accomplished by his mighty power, baring his arm as the protector of his people. The cost was great, but the victory was greater.

Jesus' heart was set on our salvation; he gave his life for the sins of his people. We rely on the mercy of God and cry out to our King for clean hearts. Thus, in his death, Christ established the throne of his father David forever. He is the greater King who poured out his blood for the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace. You can count on it.

Amen