

Written Copy: 1 Chronicles 21:15-17 “The King Who Took Your Place”

Ash Wednesday (Celebrated)

Sunday, February 26th, 2023

Text: 1 Chronicles 21:15-17

¹⁵ And God sent the angel to Jerusalem to destroy it, but as he was about to destroy it, the LORD saw, and he relented from the calamity. And he said to the angel who was working destruction, "It is enough; now stay your hand." And the angel of the LORD was standing by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. ¹⁶ And David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces. ¹⁷ And David said to God, "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."

Exegetical Statement

Both David and Israel sinned against the LORD. Israel's was in some manner turning away from the LORD who had blessed them with peace. David's was doubting the LORD's ability to protect his kingdom in a time of peace and instead putting his trust in the number of able-bodied soldiers. However, his repentant heart convicts him of this sin and he confesses before the LORD. The LORD forgives him but David, as king, must choose between three awful consequences. Instead of choosing one particular one he chooses to fall into the hands of the LORD rather than fall into the hands of his enemies, since despite being given these choices, David believes the LORD to still be gracious and merciful. And the LORD is. As the angel of destruction is about to wipe out Jerusalem the LORD stays his hand. He allows David to see this, and David reacts in humble repentance, begging not just for the LORD's mercy, but in confessing his fault and responsibility asks that he and his family might suffer in place of the people. Instead, the LORD instructs David to build an altar and offer burnt offerings through which the LORD conveys his forgiveness for David and Israel. The result is the angel sheaths his sword of destruction.

Focus Statement:

David offered to take the place of Israel as God punished them for their sins. But David's offer was not sufficient enough to stop the destruction, only Jesus could and did step in and take our place and our punishment for our sins. His was the sacrifice that the oxen David offered looked as what fulfills the punishment of eternal death we owe God. In His life, death, and resurrection we find ample proof that He is the only place to turn when we are worried about what the future holds. He is the One holding us in good times and bad, keeping us in repentant faith toward Him just as David was.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

Like David and Israel, we at times put our trust in ourselves and earthly things instead of in the LORD first and foremost. We also at times fail to assume responsibility for our mistakes and instead blame someone else for what is our fault.

What the hearer should do as a result:

See all the things we turn to for help and comfort in times of trouble as coming from the Lord's hand, including the reason we are forgiven for our sins and doubts. Like David, empowered by the grace of God in Christ, be willing to sacrifice ourselves for others.

Subject Sentence: Christ takes our place to save us and provides hope

Introduction

His name was Gary, and he was my best friend in middle school. It was that awkward age in boys when you are trying to fit in, trying to find out who you are. Gary and I had a lot of fun, but we were not a good combination. We were what you might call “Trouble with a capital T”. We sat next to each other in Mr. Snoad’s class, all the way at the back; also not a very wise decision. It was a warm spring day. The school didn’t have central air. The windows were open, but the air coming in was warm and humid. I remember Mr. Snoad was working with us on a math problem, and he had written the formula to find the answer on the chalkboard. A young lady in the class wasn’t paying attention when he was explaining the formula. So, when she began to ask Mr. Snoad how to find the answer, Mr. Snoad, in frustration at her inattention, stood right beside the chalk board, raised his voice and his hands in the air saying, “Do you see me? DO YOU SEE ME?” Gary and I saw him. We saw that he was perspiring greatly under his armpits. In a fit of sophomore humor that boys that age seem to enjoy, and since I did understand what he was talking about, I spent the time he explained it again to her drawing a cartoon. It was Mr. Snoad, with his hands raised saying “Do you see me?” as the class slowly began to drown in the perspiration flowing from his armpits. I showed it to Gary, who couldn’t help but burst out with a short laugh before he could catch himself. It was enough to grab the attention of Mr. Snoad, who strode over and grabbed the paper out of Gary’s hands. My artistic talent wasn’t all that great, but he understood who the cartoon was aimed at. And he assumed Gary was the artist. Turning red faced, and barely containing his anger, he commanded that Gary head down to the principal’s office. Gary glanced at me, waiting for me to speak up and at least take some responsibility for it. But I looked away and remained silent. I allowed him to take responsibility and the punishment for what I had done. He never ratted on me. But our friendship understandably was never the same after that. Have you ever in your life, let someone else take the fall for you?

Let me ask you a different question. What do you do when you face trouble in your life? Where is the first place you turn to? I would like to come across as the good and pious Christian and give the Children’s Message answer saying, “I always turn to the LORD in prayer.” But that would be a lie. Where do you and I turn when we are in trouble? When we face a financial crisis or are afraid one might be coming, we turn to our bank accounts and our stocks and bonds instead of the LORD who blesses us with these means. When we hear a troubling report from the doctor, or are afraid we might have some health issues, we turn to and place our hope and trust in doctors and medicine instead of first and foremost the LORD who gives us these as His blessing. In our lives lived out in this world how much trust do we put in politicians and government institutions to be our savior? How many times do we turn to the LORD as our second go to, or even as an afterthought?

And it's one thing to call upon Him when times are hard and difficult. But what about when things are going well? Do we ever fall into the same pattern of looking to the LORD and thanking Him as an afterthought? How about this, have you ever found yourself, when things are going well, wondering and worrying when the axe will fall?

David's Sin and His Response

In our Old Testament Lesson David and Israel find themselves in a time of peace, given as a blessing from the LORD. But temporal peace doesn't always translate into peace in our hearts. There is trouble brewing with the king and with his people. But what exactly is it? **2 Samuel 24:1 Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah."** Here we have the LORD being angry with the nation as a whole. Yet it sounds like the LORD Himself is actively moving David to sin. But Scripture tells us that not only does the LORD not sin, but He never tempts us to sin. Alongside with this verse from 2 Samuel, our Old Testament Lesson gives us a better understanding. **1 Chronicles 21:1 Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.**

What this means is that God allowed Satan to come and speak his tempting voice to Israel and Israel listened. While we don't have the details here, two possibilities have been presented by Bible Scholars. One is that the LORD's anger was kindled by the nation's complicity and willingness to anoint and follow David's son Absalom who wanted to steal the throne from his father David. Absalom was killed in battle, and by and large the nation seems to have fallen back in line behind David-the LORD's anointed king. But perhaps Israel allowed Satan to convince them that their sin of supporting Absalom's overthrow of the LORD's anointed King was no big deal; that they didn't need to repent and ask forgiveness by offering the appropriate sacrifices to the LORD for atonement.

The other possibility is that this time of peace that the nation was experiencing moved the people to listen to Satan's tempting voice, and put their worship and obedience to God on the backburner. Perhaps they were thinking, "Everything is going fine, so we'll call you if we need You LORD. But for now, we are too busy living and loving life to worship You as we should. This would be akin to putting God in a glass box on the shelf with the notation printed on the case: "Break glass in case of hardship or war." Do we ever adopt the same kind of attitude?

But the nation isn't the only one to fall from God's grace. David did as well. Satan was at work in his heart and mind. Even though it was peacetime, David begins to worry about how long that might last. Perhaps Satan is there on his shoulder whispering, "You know, David, these nations around you have been quiet for now. But don't you think they took notice when they saw your son try and take your throne by force? And they saw a portion of your kingdom fall in behind him. I bet they see you as being weak and your hold on the throne tenacious. Maybe they are thinking this as a good time to attack you. You better do something about it." And so, David does. He commands the general of his army, Joab, to travel throughout the kingdom and take a census.

Now David's sin that angered the LORD is not the census per se. The LORD is angered by the reason David wants the census to be done. He wants Joab to count the number of able-bodied fighting men. It's kind of like having men sign-up for the draft, having them ready to be mobilized. Keep in mind this is a time of peace, a gift from the LORD. And not only is David worried when he need not be, he is placing his trust and hope in the wrong place. As David himself once wrote in **Psalm 20:7 Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.** But David has stopped listening to the voice and promise of the LORD and has let Satan tempt him into doubting God's goodness and protection. Instead of turning to the Lord in prayer, David feels he needs to take matters into his own hands; that he needs to trust instead in those chariots, and horses, and the size of his army first and foremost. His commander Joab knows that this is wrong, that this will be displeasing to the LORD and tries to talk David out of it. But David won't hear a word of it.

However, this is not the same David that had the adulterous affair with Bathsheba, who rather than take responsibility for his sin tried to make it look like Uriah got her pregnant. And when that didn't work arranged to have him killed in battle. At that time David lived unrepentantly in those sins for almost 9 months until Nathan the prophet confronted him. But here we see David with a different heart. We see that he has a repentant heart in which the Holy Spirit is alive and active. David realizes that what he has done is sinful. He turns to the LORD in confession and repentance. The LORD forgives David and does not remove him from the throne or take his life. But there will be consequences for both Israel and for David because of their sins.

The LORD sends the prophet Gad to David to lay out the three choices as to what must happen as punishment for Israel's and David's sin. His purpose in this is to change the heart of the repentant, while bringing judgement on those the omniscient LORD knows will never repent. The choices that Gad reports to David are in **1 Chronicles 21:12 either three years of famine, or three months of devastation by your foes while the sword of your enemies overtakes you, or else three days of the sword of the LORD, pestilence on the land, with the angel of the LORD destroying throughout all the territory of Israel.** Can you imagine being David, and having to choose one of these fates, when all three of them are so awful? In the mind and heart of a lesser man it might be enough to turn him away from faith in the Lord, seeing the LORD as a merciless tyrant, or move him to just give up.

But David's repentant faith shows through in his response. **1 Chronicles 21:13 Then David said to Gad, "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."** David doesn't exactly choose one out of the three. But with great faith in the grace and kindness of the LORD His God, David chooses to put himself and his kingdom in the hands of the LORD, who is more gracious and merciful than anyone or anything else.

And so, the LORD chooses to bring the pestilence: a fatal sickness or disease upon the kingdom, one which kills 70,000 people. The angel who carries out this sentence on behalf of the LORD is about to destroy Jerusalem when the LORD stops his hand. As sinners they deserve to die, but for no other reason than His unconditional love and mercy, the LORD stops that from happening. David is allowed to see this angel, and once again his repentant heart shows through in his actions. Dressed in the clothing of deep mourning and humility David and the elders of Israel fall before the LORD on their faces, placing themselves completely at His mercy. And David utters words that help us to understand why the LORD Himself refers to David as “the man after my own heart”. **1 Chronicles 21:17 And David said to God, “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.”**

As the Lord’s anointed king, David was charged with caring for the flock of Israel. Here we see David doing just that by offering to take Israel’s place and punishment to prevent more people from dying. Israel had sinned and many remained unrepentant. They deserved what they were getting. But David asks that the LORD would allow him to take their place and that their punishment would fall upon him, so that he would die their death.

The King Who Can And Does Suffer in Our Place

The LORD does not take David up on his offer to die for the people. As noble a gesture as that was, David was in no position to do so. He himself was not worthy enough to be the sacrifice for anyone. He had his own sin. He deserved death just as they did. If anyone was going to save the people it could only be by the hand of the LORD Himself, Israel’s gracious and loving God. And that is exactly who it is that provides salvation for David and his kingdom. The LORD instructs David to build an altar and make a burnt offering of oxen to atone for the sins of David and the people. Through the blood that flowed from the sacrificed animals God’s forgiveness, grace, and mercy flowed. By that sacrifice, the hand of the LORD against the people was removed and the angel put his sword back in its sheath.

Of course, no matter how many oxen were sacrificed, their blood could never atone for the people’s sins. That sacrifice pointed forward to, and found its saving power in the willing sacrifice of another King, the King of Kings. It is only through the sacrificial suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that God’s wrath over Israel’s sins, as well as over yours and mine is atoned for. Jesus is the only King who could, and did take our place on the altar that was the cross, to save us from the pestilence that is eternal death. As Paul says in **2 Corinthians 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** Because of Jesus willing sacrifice on your behalf God the Father no longer sees you as a sinner deserving punishment and death. Through your baptismal faith He sees you as His precious and beloved child. Because of all Jesus has done, God’s hand of wrath has been stopped against all who remain in faith toward Him through Jesus Christ. All this is His gift poured into your heart and life through your baptism.

Living in Faith Towards the King Who Took Your Place

What should this mean to you and I as we contemplate the overwhelming love and mercy that is the King of Kings taking our place and dying our death? It means that we are to look to Him alone in every moment of our lives. We are to look to Him first when trouble comes, and see every means of help and assistance as coming from His hand. We are to look to Him especially during the good times, seeing they too are from His hand, and giving thanks in worship and praise for them. It means living with repentant hearts that willingly admit we will fail at this in all moments of our life. It means holding fast in faith that our King of Kings is also our merciful Savior who promises never to abandon us, but always forgives us. It means knowing and believing that the times of struggle and affliction, the times of disease and sickness, the times of financial crisis come only when the LORD allows them to come. And He uses them to keep us in a steadfast repentant relationship with Him that extends from now all the way to eternal life to come.

Conclusion

I'm not proud of my cowardice in allowing my best friend to take my place and suffer for what I did that was wrong. I'm not proud that I never apologized and asked his forgiveness for that. I am very thankful that the King of my life, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ took my place, and His sacrificial death and resurrection covers that sin, along with every other one I have committed since. His mercy and grace encourage me to turn back to Him as David did when the Holy Spirit convicts me that I've listened to Satan's voice and strayed from God's will for my life. And David's example moves me to be willing to sacrifice my time, talent, and treasures to come alongside those who are struggling with the same issues that afflict my life, so that I can share with them the hope I have by faith in the One who sacrificed all to save me, and save them for a relationship with Him now, and for eternity to come. Amen.