

#40 “What Can We Learn about God’s Sovereignty from Two Parallel Passages of the Bible?”

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King David made a dreadful mistake in choosing to take a census of the nation of Israel. There was no reason to do this, other than to boast in his kingdom and its success, power, and large numbers. Only David and the people, not God, could possibly be honored in this venture. God wanted David and the people to keep trusting Him to bless them as they remained faithful to Him. God did not want them gloating in the blessing but in the One Who brought the blessing. David let his focus get off track, pride took its hold, and a census was taken of the people. David’s decision brought the judgment of God upon the people in the form of a deadly disease that wiped out 70,000 men of Israel. God demonstrated that He blesses and takes away and that He is jealous for honor, praise, reverence, and glory. Right where David put his boast, God showed that He would have none of it.

But it is what preceded this sequence of events that is so interesting. 2 Samuel 24:1 says, "Now again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah.’" God had been angry with Israel before in 2 Samuel 21:1 because of the evil of King Saul, and a three year famine was the result. In 24:1, we find God angry against Israel yet "again." Because of this, He "incited" David to number the people, which inevitably would bring a judgment of God against the people just as Saul’s sin had brought famine on the entire nation.

This raises two questions. First, can and does God incite someone to sin? The answer is found in the parallel passage of this account in 1 Chronicles 21:1 which says, "Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel." We also know from James 1:13 that God is not tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone. So it was not God but Satan who directly incited David to sin, though God was sovereign over the entire sequence of events. The second question is what moved God initially to be "kindled" with anger against the nation of Israel, as the ESV and KJV versions read. Actually, the Bible doesn’t give us a clear answer here, but what is clear is that God in His sovereign, all-knowing, and all-powerful ways, worked through David’s sin to bring judgment and call the people and the King to honor His name and give Him the credit due Him. In other words, God saw the end before the beginning. David didn’t realize that he was incited against Israel when he sinned; he merely gave into temptation and numbered the people. Yet ultimately God’s purpose was to work through this event in David’s life to bring judgment on the people and, of course, himself. According to God’s sovereign design, the course of events of David’s life were not just about David himself, but they had great influence and purpose regarding the nation as a whole.

We can draw several lessons from these verses which speak to God's sovereignty. First, God doesn't force anyone to sin against his own will, but He does sovereignly allow Satan to tempt and incite to evil for reasons not fully known to us. We do know that one day God will put him away for good into the lake of fire, but in the meantime, He allows him to roam about bringing division, death, deception, and destruction. This understanding that Satan can only do what God allows him to do is important. Satan and God are not two equal powers going head to head against one another with a particular outcome determined based upon which one of them wins on a daily basis. God is in complete control, and thus we can rest assured that God can and will work all things for the good of His children (Romans 8:28), even when we give into Satanic temptation and fall into sin. God can forgive and bring blessing even then because He is sovereign and perfectly loving. Second, it is interesting that God allowed David to be tempted, in a sense, as a result of the sin of the people. The lesson for us here is that our sin does affect others as God works in our lives and theirs. Our lives are not as private and personal as we might think given that God sees all and is over all; thus, a secondary impact of God's sovereignty is that how we live, whether good or bad, does impact the lives of others.

Passages like this cause us to probe the wonders of God's sovereign power, omniscient mind, supreme authority, and perfect, purposeful will. We may not be able to understand it all, but at least it should cause us to fall down in worship before Him Who is the only wise God Who does understand it all.

There is great blessing and privilege in being a child of a God like this. May we today praise Him, give Him the credit due Him, and acknowledge His hand in all our ways (Proverbs 3:6). As Paul says in Romans 16:27, "To the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen."