HIS MERCY IS GREAT

2 Samuel 24:1-25

David said to Gad, “I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into human hands.”

—2 Samuel 24:14

Happy Father’s Day to all of the fathers today! It’s a time to celebrate our fathers. Do you have a reason to celebrate your father today? Is there one thing about him that you are thankful for? Please find one thing and call your fathers to tell them. Or, if possible, eat with them today.

Today, during this time of worship, we can also celebrate our Father in heaven. In today’s passage, David speaks of one thing about God that he was thankful for: he is merciful. David said these words about God in verse 14.

David said to Gad, “I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into human hands.”

The title of my message today is, "His Mercy Is Great." I’d like to focus on God’s great mercy, as we look at the passage, as one reason for us to celebrate and honor him today. Because of his mercy being great, David trusted in God and turned to God, even when he had done wrong. In his great mercy God saves his people. In his mercy he gave another chance. He listened to them. He received their sacrifices and heard their prayers. Being merciful is a key characteristic of our Father in heaven.

Mercy saves people in distress. It is the definition of mercy. Mercy doesn’t treat as we deserve. It doesn’t crush or judge, but saves. Without mercy we say, “Ha! You’re getting what you deserve.” But people are saved because of mercy. Especially, children benefit from a merciful father. Fathers might be prone to anger and helping them children to do right, but not as much in the area of mercy. I’m also referring to my self. One time at home, my daughter turned to me and said, “Daddy, are you mad?” I said, “No, I’m not mad.” But she didn’t believe. So she asked me again, “You’re not mad?” Again, I said, “No. But I’ll get mad if you keep asking me.” She still didn’t believe me. It struck something in me. I really was not mad, but she thought I was mad. It made me wonder what kind of person I was, especially to my family at home. I must have been a mad person, even without knowing it. It produced a kind of fear, rather than love at home. So I put a banner up in the living from Psalm 103:8 that says, ‘The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.” Mercy is important to build trust and to help children grow. In the time of doing wrong, the time of a father’s anger, is when mercy is so important for children.

His mercy in this passage also speaks ahead to Jesus: of his mercy, his shepherding, and how he sacrificed himself to save his people. So, let’s look at this passage to see God’s great mercy that saved his people.

First, verse 1 says,

Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.”

The passage begins with "Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel..." We notice here that the story begins with the Lord angry with the people. It was before David counted the fighting men. They had done something, but it doesn’t say why. Then, because he was angry, he incited David against them, so that David said to take a census.

At first, it looks confusing. Why did David do this when incited against the people? Why would counting the people be something to do if the Lord was angry with them?

I’m not sure, but right now I read verse 1 as the Lord saying, "Go then, and do what you want. Take a census.” His anger was somehow related with their attitude about the status of the people.

In verses 2-3, David's and Joab's responses give us further clues about the condition of Israel.

First, look at verse 2.

[2] So the king said to Joab and the army commanders with him, “Go throughout the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba and enroll the fighting men, so that I may know how many there are.”

David commanded them to enroll the fighting men. His thoughts were first to the fighting men. He had no need for fighting men at that time. They were not in battle. They had no threats. He just wanted to know how many there are. It was to get a measurement of their strength and numbers. There was pride in David’s heart that was based on people, rather than God.

Then, surprisingly, it is Joab who speaks up and tries to dissuade David from counting them.

Verses 3-4 say,

[3] But Joab replied to the king, “May the Lord your God multiply the troops a hundred times over, and may the eyes of my lord the king see it. But why does my lord the king want to do such a thing?”

[4] The king’s word, however, overruled Joab and the army commanders; so they left the presence of the king to enroll the fighting men of Israel.

First, he said, “May the Lord your God multiply the troops a hundred times over, and may the eyes of my lord the king see it.” He turned Davdi’s attention to David. God can multiply the troops as much as they need, even a hundred times over. Trusting in God was the big deal, according to Joab. This was very serious. What he says here sounds similar to Nathan’s rebuke of David when he took Uriah’s wife to be his own. God had said, “If what I had given you wasn’t enough, I would have given you more.”

Joab's words here show that the strength of the army had not been from their numbers but from God. Then he asked a good question, “Why does my lord the king want to do such a thing?” But David didn’t answer. He had already said he wanted to know how many there are.

For a commander to count his army sounds reasonable. If he knows how many there are, he can utilize them properly. Joab, of all people, could have understood this. There could have many seemingly good reasons to count them. But he didn’t think it was good to do. His words tell why it wasn’t good: it was not based on trusting in God.

Joab was right. The strength of David and of the nation had never been based on their numbers, but based on the strength of the Lord who helped them. This was very clearly spoken of at length in the previous passage. Although David had so many soldiers in his army, there was a focus on two groups, one called the Three and another group called the Thirty. That’s just a few compared to the great number of the army. But what were these Three and Thirty able to accomplish? One man was able to take on 800 enemies on his own. Another took on 300. The Three together could infiltrate the strongest, most fortified enemy territory and return with water from the well of that fortified city. One man could kill a lion in a snow pit. They could do anything! And their victory was attributed not to their numbers, but by the strength and help of the Lord who brought a great victory (2 Samuel 23:10). In fact, their strength is displayed in spite of their numbers. It is highlighted by stated fact that in each case of bravery, it first says that the army fled from the enemy, and the mighty warrior was by himself. And this is also God’s mercy because if your army desserts the battle field, what do they derseve but to get beaten badly by the enemy? Yet, God was merciful and brought a victory for them despite what they deserved.

In this way, David’s desire to count the fighting men was unnecessary and was not as innocent as it may seem. By trusting in God, he really didn’t need to know how many there were. By trusting in God who gives them strength and who brings victory in battle, he could be completely confident and content as he was.

When we consider how we’ve seen David’s kingdom be established and grow throughout 1 and 2 Samuel, it was all by God’s help and mercy. He was just a boy. No one thought he could be a king or even fight against the enemies. Even Samuel didn’t see a king in him. But God chose him. And God helped him even against the giant Goliath. By God’s help, he became so useful so that people sang songs about him, saying, “David has killed his tens of thousands.” Then, when Saul branded him a criminal and threatened his life, David fled. He was by himself. He lived as a fugitive in enemy lands. He pretended to be against his own people. But then thousands of people came to him to support him. God eventually established his kingdom over Saul and all who rose up against him. It was not because David was numerous or strong, but because he had trusted in God even when he did wrong. It was David who said, in Psalm 103:10,

he does not treat us as our sins deserve  or repay us according to our iniquities.

Only experience write this psalm. He had done wrong. He knew what his sins deserved and what the people’s sins deserved. But God was merciful to them.

If we consider the people of Israel, it was also God’s mercy. God began with just one person, Abraham. Abraham was not numerous. He was old. He was married. He had no children. He had only a nephew who was not loyal to him. But by God’s power, Abraham became the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob who was the father of the twelve sons who became Israel. It was not Abraham’s numbers or strength. In fact, it was despite Abraham’s numbers, age, and strength, that God made him numerous and into a father of many nations. Yet, this was done despite Abraham’s many mistakes. He doubted many times. He acted out of fear. Abraham fled the land after God first brought him there. What should God do? He deserved what he would get in Egypt, such a losing his wife. But God was merciful and brought him back. In fact, he came back to Canaan even richer than when he left! When God told him that he would have a son by his wife Sarah, he laughed as if it was a joke! God could say, fine! You don’t deserve a son. But instead God said, I will give you a son by Sarah and you are to name him Isaac (which means laughter). God was merciful and funny. Whenever they called out to Isaac (laughter), they could remember the mercy of God that brought them such joy out of their doubt and despair.

That is how God had worked throughout the history of his people. He worked by those who trusted in him, not by numbers or strength. Numbers in this way is not important to God. People like Abraham and David do not need to know how many there are. This is not how he reveals himself. If Abraham needed numbers, God told him to go outside and count the stars (Gen 15:1-16). That’s how many children he would have!

Once, the prophet Elijah was in despair. He thought he was the only prophet left. He wanted to give up. But what did God say to him?

1 Kings 19:13b-18 say,

[13b] Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

[14] He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

[15] The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. [16] Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. [17] Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. [18] Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

The Lord sent Elijah to anoint three people to serve the Lord’s purpose.Three is three times more than one. The Lord also said that he had reserved 7,000 people for himself. That’s a lot of people! Providing people in numbers is not a problem for the Lord. But it can be a problem for his people if they focus on it, like Elijah. It’s striking because the people really had sinned. They deserved to be left to their idols and foreign nations. But in his mercy God sent Elijah back with 7,003 people to serve him and keep the nation going.

At one time, Jesus entered Jerusalem and his disciples welcomed him as the king, with praises and blessings.

Luke 19:38-40 tell about this. The disciples said:

[38] “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

[39] Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

[40] “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

Jesus could increase the numbers even from stones, if he wanted. Numbers were not an issue. Even John the Baptist said to the Jewish leaders, "And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham” (Matthew 3:9).

Even when we see the growth of the church in the book of Acts, after Jesus ascended into heaven, we see that it is the Lord’s work, not that of the people.

Acts 2:46-47 say,

[46] Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, [47] praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

It says that the Lord added their number daily. The disciples met together, they praised God, they enjoyed the favor of the people. But it was the Lord adding to their numbers. We don’t find any place in the new testament where the apostles are concerned with their numbers or counting the people. They didn’t push each other about it. They didn’t plan according to their counting. They trusted that to God. We may see only one person, but God has 7,000. He can add daily, if he wants to.

The strength of God’s people is not in their numbers, but in their trust in God. God did not encourage counting. In fact, in today’s passage, he incited David to do it because he was angry with the people. In part, David’s own focus was wrongly on knowing the number of soldiers he had.

There can be any number of good sounding reasons for counting. And I don’t mean to say that any counting is wrong. I don’t think it is good to do or to give attention to. What I am saying is that numbers are not the mark of our strength, our health, our history, or our future. If we focus on it, we may miss out on experiencing the power of God who adds to those being saved. As much as we talk about having faith in God, we ought to apply this to the area of numbers and counting.

Personally, all the time I spent counting didn’t help me to have faith in God. It often pushed me to do more for the sake of the numbers and showing off. Sometimes people said, “Prove yourself!” So, I tried to do so with numbers. Later, when I looked back at those numbers, I felt bad. I could say I did a lot back then, but where were all those people now? I didn’t know. I could only trust in God that he is still working in their lives. I hope and pray to see those people later on, especially in the kingdom of God.

It is good to remember the mercy of God that makes a people his people.

This is another reason why counting was not encouraged at that time: it is because the people belong to God, not to David or to any other person.

When Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt, the Lord told him to count the people in several places of the Bible. But God also gave a condition in counting them.

Exodus 30:11-12 say,

[11] Then the Lord said to Moses, [12] “When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the Lord a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them."

So, when Moses counted the people money was collected for their lives (e.g., Numbers 3:46-51). It was called “redemption money.” After he collected the redemption money, he gave it to the priests. It was a reminder that the people belong to God. They did not belong to Moses, David or any other leader, but to God. There is an actual price on each person.

Jesus also paid a price to make a people for God. He paid the price of his life, shedding his blood on the cross.

In the book of Revelation, there is a vision of angels singing of Jesus,

[9] “You are worthy to take the scroll

    and to open its seals,

because you were slain,

    and with your blood you purchased for God

    persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

[10] You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,

    and they will reign on the earth.”

 —Revelation 5:9-10

The people of God are the people purchased by the blood of Jesus. No one else shed their blood to purchase people from all over the world, except Jesus. They are his. Yet how often do we call his people as ours, without realizing it? Do you call them, “my sheep,” or “my Bible student”? Maybe we shouldn’t say that, for they belong to God, not to us. This also requires trust in God. When I talk to Terry Lopez about my children, he often reminds me that these children are not mine but that they belong to God. This reminder always proves helpful and which I am still learning from.

My point is that God, in his mercy, makes a people to be his own. In his mercy, he sent Jesus who purchased people with his blood. In his mercy, he adds to our numbers, he gives strength and he gives victory. Sometimes counting is good. For example, Jesus told a parable of a shepherd who had 100 sheep, but he found that there were only 99 there. 1 had gotten away, so the shepherd went after it to find it. We also know how many children we have and we wouldn’t want to be short on the number of our children or a budget. [Once I was driving with my baby in the seat behind me. We went a long distance and then I felt a kick on the back of my chair. I got scared. Then I heard a voice say, “Daddy!” I then realized that my baby was in the car. I had somehow forgotten my baby was in the car. It was as if I was reminded, oh yeah, there is a human being that belongs to you called Cori Mae, and she is in the car now. I forgot all about her existence. :( ] I’m saying that numbers are not our history or mark of strength, but God's great mercy is. His mercy saves and adds more people. He knows his people because he purchased them. He knows how many children he has. They are all numbered before him.

Verses 5-8 tell us that Joab and his army commanders traveled throughout the country over a period of almost 10 months to count all the fighting men. In 10 months, a woman can conceive and give birth to a baby. Full term is about 10 months. They were gone for quite a long time.

Look at verses 9-10.

[9] Joab reported the number of the fighting men to the king: In Israel there were eight hundred thousand able-bodied men who could handle a sword, and in Judah five hundred thousand. [10] David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the Lord, “I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing.”

The number came out to 1.3 million fighting men. When David heard this number, he was conscience-stricken. He confessed his sin right away to the Lord and said he had done a very foolish thing. I think the great number showed him how foolish it was. He hadn’t needed to count. The Lord had provided such a great number of fighters, ready and able-bodied for David. He was not at a loss at all. What did David gain by counting them? Nothing but a guilty conscience. He asked God to take away his guilt.

It is important to point out David’s response here. When his conscience was stricken, he listened to it and prayed to the Lord right away. He hadn’t listened to Joab, but now he was ready to listen to his conscience that was struck. He was the king, but he didn’t let his position get in the way. Then the Lord’s word came to him in reply.

Let’s look at verses 11-13.

[11] Before David got up the next morning, the word of the Lord had come to Gad the prophet, David’s seer: [12] “Go and tell David, ‘This is what the Lord says: I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you.’”

[13] So Gad went to David and said to him, “Shall there come on you three years of famine in your land? Or three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you? Or three days of plague in your land? Now then, think it over and decide how I should answer the one who sent me.”

It is very interesting that the Lord laid out three options for punishment, letting David choose which one would be carried out against him. The prophet Gad said, “think it over and decide.” David answered right away.

Verse 14 says,

David said to Gad, “I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into human hands.”

David understood these three options as really two options: either choosing to fall into God’s hands or human hands. If there was a famine for three years, which is a long time, they might fall into human hands. The people would seek help from other nations, either inviting them or going over to them. They would be at the mercy of others for food. The option about fleeing from enemies for three months is obvious in this regard. Three months is very dangerous to run from enemies. Have you ever had a dog chase you? How long did it last? Maybe thirty seconds to a minute? Yet how intense was it? Now imagine dogs chasing you for three months! They will catch you and eat you But David understood the option of the plague as falling into God’s hands. Three days seems so short compared to the options of three years or three months. But the issue also not about duration. God can do anything he wants. Imagine putting yourself in the hands of a person angry with you who can do whatever they want to you. In three days, God could have wiped out the whole nation easily. It is a terrifying thought. Yet David saw it was safest to put themselves in God’s hands for he is merciful.

So verse 15 says, "So the Lord sent a plague on Israel from that morning until the end of the time designated, and seventy thousand of the people from Dan to Beersheba died.” From the top of the country bottom area, people were struck.

David’s choosing the plague, saying that it is better to fall in to God’s hands because of his great mercy, tells us that David knew God was merciful. We don’t know what people will do. People have shown themselves very cruel and merciless. But David knew that God is merciful. He submitted himself to God, hoping God would be merciful to them. People may or may not be merciful. David experienced many who were not merciful or truthful. Even David himself was not merciful sometimes. But he knew that God is merciful, that his mercy is great. So he put them in God’s hands.

I see it like a child that trusts in his father. Even though he had done wrong, he is ready to tell his father and face the consequences. That is hard to do. A child has to trust the father fully. Otherwise, he would not go to his father. He would rather take his chances with the authorities. It will surely be disappointing to have your child confess wrong doing. But it is surely better to have your child to come to you because he or she trusts you, rather than to go to others. I think that this trust may come in part from experiencing a father’s great mercy. Mercy that helps, rather than condemns. The Lord had established such a relationship with David. David did not want to take any chances with people, but he gave himself to the Lord who is merciful.

The rest of the passage shows us how the Lord showed his great mercy to David and the people after the plague. God stopped the angel from killing any more people. He said, “Enough!” He then instructed David to build an altar. David did so, as God commanded, and offered sacrifices to the Lord. Then the Lord accepted it and answered prayers on behalf of the land. The plague was stopped.

Verse 25 says,

David built an altar to the Lord there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Then the Lord answered his prayer in behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped.

The sacrifices came a price, which David paid. The passage makes it a point that David paid the full and fair price for that sacrifice. David was willing to take the responsibility on himself as the shepherd of the people.

This price and the mercy of God in this passage looks ahead to Jesus who gave up his life as a sacrifice to save his people. Jesus Christ is the evidence of God’s mercy.

John 10:14-15, and18 say,

[14] “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— [15] just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. [18] No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

It was not just on the cross that we see the mercy of God through Jesus. He was merciful to those in distress throughout his earthly ministry before dying on the cross.

Blind people came to him, shouting, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”

A woman came to him, begging, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”

Jesus healed them all according to their faith and their requests. His mercy healed and saved so many in distress, all according to their requests and faith in him. He opened the eyes of the blind. He healed the sick and demon possessed. He gave widows back their dead sons. He fed hungry people who came to him. He was not a clinic. He was merciful to all these people as a shepherd for them.

Hebrews 2:17 says,

For this reason he [Jesus Christ] had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

He was the priest and also the sacrifice. He gave his blood for his people. He paid the price. So, today we can celebrate and give thanks to God for his great mercy in Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us. Because of his mercy and sacrifice there is forgiveness of sins for us. He did it as our shepherd, standing on behalf of the people, so that they would be forgiven and made new through him.

As it was for the Israelites and for David, it is because of God's mercy that those who believe in Jesus become part of the people of God.

As 1 Peter 2:9-10 say,

[9] But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. [10] Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We can praise him now for his great mercy that makes us his people, his servants, a holy nation, his special possession.

Furthermore, as God is merciful, he wants his people to be merciful. The merciful are blessed. Those who are merciful should not feel weak or like door mats. But they ought to know that they are blessed and work with God for the advancement of his kingdom for they receive God’s mercy and extend it to others.

Consider:

Luke 6:36

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

and, Matthew 5:7

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

We see that there is a beautiful flowing of mercy from God to us, from us to others, and then from God back to us again.

God didn’t stop his people from doing wrong. He didn’t give them permissions here and there. But he did show himself as merciful through Jesus Christ to cover over all of our sins and to bless us, making us as his people. A father can control, judge, and punish. The character of our heavenly Father is his love and mercy. His mercy saves. By his mercy people become a people of God who grow in the image of Jesus and as servants of God.

Today, on Father’s Day, we give thanks to our fathers and to God for his great mercy through Jesus Christ. Let’s remember it and praise him! Let’s remember his mercy and give it to others as much as God has given to us.