

Thought for the Week 21<sup>th</sup> March 2021

**READING**                      1 Chronicles 21

**David counts the fighting men**

<sup>1</sup> Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel. <sup>2</sup> So David said to Joab and the commanders of the troops, 'Go and count the Israelites from Beersheba to Dan. Then report back to me so that I may know how many there are.' <sup>3</sup> But Joab replied, 'May the LORD multiply his troops a hundred times over. My lord the king, are they not all my lord's subjects? Why does my lord want to do this? Why should he bring guilt on Israel?' <sup>4</sup> The king's word, however, overruled Joab; so Joab left and went throughout Israel and then came back to Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> Joab reported the number of the fighting men to David: in all Israel there were one million one hundred thousand men who could handle a sword, including four hundred and seventy thousand in Judah. <sup>6</sup> But Joab did not include Levi and Benjamin in the numbering, because the king's command was repulsive to him. <sup>7</sup> This command was also evil in the sight of God; so he punished Israel. <sup>8</sup> Then David said to God, 'I have sinned greatly by doing this. Now, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing.' <sup>9</sup> The LORD said to Gad, David's seer, <sup>10</sup> '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.'" <sup>11</sup> So Gad went to David and said to him, 'This is what the LORD says: "Take your choice: <sup>12</sup> three years of famine, three months of being swept away<sup>[a]</sup> before your enemies, with their swords overtaking you, or three days of the sword of the LORD – days of plague in the land, with the angel of the LORD ravaging every part of Israel." Now then, decide how I should answer the one who sent me.' <sup>13</sup> David said to Gad, 'I am in deep distress. Let me fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is very great; but do not let me fall into human hands.'

<sup>14</sup> So the LORD sent a plague on Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead. <sup>15</sup> And God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem. But as the angel was doing so, the LORD saw it and relented concerning the disaster and said to the angel who was destroying the people, 'Enough! Withdraw your hand.' The angel of the LORD was then standing at the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite. <sup>16</sup> David looked up and saw the angel of the LORD standing between heaven and earth, with a drawn sword in his hand extended over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell face down. <sup>17</sup> David said to God, 'Was it not I who ordered the fighting men to be counted? I, the shepherd,<sup>[a]</sup> have sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? LORD my God, let your hand fall on me and my family, but do not let this plague remain on your people.' <sup>18</sup> Then the angel of the LORD ordered Gad to tell David to go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite. <sup>19</sup> So David went up in obedience to the word that Gad had spoken in the name of the LORD. <sup>20</sup> While Araunah was threshing wheat, he turned and saw the angel; his four sons who were with him hid themselves. <sup>21</sup> Then David approached, and when Araunah looked and saw him, he left the threshing-floor and bowed down before David with his face to the ground. <sup>22</sup> David said to him, 'Let me have the site of your threshing-floor so that I can build an altar to the LORD, that the plague on the people may be stopped. Sell it to me at the full price.' <sup>23</sup> Araunah said to David, 'Take it! Let my lord the king do whatever pleases him. Look, I will give the oxen for the burnt offerings, the threshing-sledges for the wood, and the wheat for the grain offering. I will give all this.' <sup>24</sup> But King David replied to Araunah, 'No, I insist on paying the full price. I will not take for the LORD what is yours, or sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing.' <sup>25</sup> So David paid Araunah six hundred shekels<sup>[a]</sup> of gold for the site. <sup>26</sup> David built an altar to the LORD there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. He called on the LORD, and the LORD answered him with fire from heaven on the altar of burnt offering. <sup>27</sup> Then the LORD spoke to the angel, and he put his sword back into its sheath. <sup>28</sup> At that time, when David saw that the LORD had answered him on the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite, he offered sacrifices there. <sup>29</sup> The tabernacle of the LORD, which Moses had made in the wilderness, and the altar of burnt offering were at that time on the high place at Gibeon. <sup>30</sup> But David could not go before it to enquire of God, because he was afraid of the sword of the angel of the LORD.

Today, Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2021 is Census day in Northern Ireland and in England and Wales. As happened once every 10 years, today, every household has to answer a series of questions on everyone living at that address. The government collects this information for statistical and research purposes to help with policy and planning for the future. A census has been taken every ten years since 1801 except for 1941 in the UK because of the Second World War and in a census in Ireland was not held because of the War of Independence and the setting up of the Northern Ireland State. It was held in 1926, but the entire records have been lost!

Some interesting facts have come to light in the 2011 UK census. In answering the question on religion, around 177,000 people claimed to be Jedi Knights though this number is down on the 2001 figure by more than a half. A total of 1,893 people in England and Wales claimed to be Satanists, with the highest number in a single area living in Bristol. 6,242 people answered the question on religion as "heavy metal." The city of Norwich set itself apart as the capital of Godlessness with the highest proportion of people (42.5%) stating they have no religion. In the 2011 Census in Northern Ireland, 40.8% claimed to be Roman Catholic, 19.1% claimed to be Presbyterian, 13.7% Church of Ireland, 3% Methodist, 5.8% other Christian denominations. Just 0.8% were members of other religions and 16.9% claimed to have no religion at all or did not answer the question. That means that just over 82% of the Northern Ireland population claimed to be Christian. But I wonder how many of them were in church that Sunday! When the new census figures are released next year, it will be interesting to see how this has changed during the past 10 years.

Of course, holding a census didn't just start 200 years ago. In 1086 the famous "Doomsday Book" was a result of King William's census to see just what he had conquered in 1066! Back in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in the Kingdom of Dal Riada (basically part of Northern Ireland and Scotland) there was a list called the "Tradition of the Men of Alba." And, of course, there is that most famous census of all that we hear about every Christmas Carol Service when Luke 2 is read. *"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. <sup>2</sup> (And this taxing was first made when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city."*

But today we are going back a further 1,000 years or so into the Old Testament to a lesser known story from the time of King David. We read it together from 1 Chronicles 21. It begins in verse 1 by saying: *"Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel."* A couple of things strike us when I read this. The first is that Satan gets the blame for coming up with this idea. The scriptures tell us a lot of actions Satan takes against God's people right from the very beginning. He tempts us (Genesis 3), he accuses us (Revelation 12:10), he seeks to devour us (1 Peter 5:8), he tricks us (2 Corinthians 11:3) and he hinders us (1 Thessalonians 2:18) and in this case he incited. The idea and the impulse to act came from Satan when he incited King David to take a census.

The second thing that strikes us is: So, what's wrong with taking a census anyhow? After all, as we've said, we take a census in our country every 10 years. It may be an annoyance, but no one considers it to be a sin to do it. However, when David took his census it was a sin. Why? The answer can be found in Jeremiah 9:23-24 This is what the Lord says: *"Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,"* declares the Lord. The real question therefore is:

The sin is not in the census itself, it's in the heart attitude behind it. Back when all David had was a slingshot and 5 stones; it was easy to put all his trust in the Lord and slay Goliath. But now David was king of Israel with an impressive army at his command. Now, rather than relying solely on the Lord, he put his confidence in military power. Israel was surrounded by enemies, and back then it was normal for nations to go to war with each other every spring ... as soon as the ground dried out from the winter mud. David, no doubt had scores to settle with the pagan nations around him. And his census revealed that he had one million one hundred thousand men old enough to fight in battle at his disposal, which, of course, gave him confidence. The problem was that David was not taking God into account in this census. Israel was not just the same as any other nation. This was a Nation chosen and formed to be God's own people.

If you think back to the account of Gideon in Judges Chapter 7 as the people entered the Promised Land. Gideon prepared for battle with what he considered to be a decent army of 32,000 men, but then God thinned his troops two times. He finally went to war with only 300 men, and not a single one of those men lost their lives, because God gave them the victory. God wanted His people to put all their trust in Him, not in their own power. It seems that David had forgotten this and was counting on the strength of his army, so Satan incited him to take a census. When David told Joab, who was the chief commander of the troops, to start the count, Joab saw right away that this census came from David's sinful pride. Joab's response was: *Why does my lord want to do this? Why should he bring guilt on Israel?*" 1 Chronicles 21:3

Satan wants to incite us in the same way. It doesn't matter what the topic is, his aim is for us to put our trust in ANYTHING other than God. We're all too prone to trust in our own resources when things are going our way. It's easier to put all your trust in God when your bank account is empty than when it's full. It's easier to trust completely in God when you get fired from your job than when you get a promotion. So, what are we counting? Are we counting our money? Are we counting on our ability? Are you counting on the wisdom of the government to keep us prosperous? Are you counting on your job, or your health, or your clever plans, or your education? This little-known story about David should make us stop and think about it. The only way we have any REAL security is to put ALL our trust in God.

David could have avoided a lot of trouble if he had listened to the advice of his friend, Joab. The same thing is true for us. We must never think that every idea we have is a good one. Yes, of course we can have impulses and promptings from the Holy Spirit, but sometimes they come from the UNholy Spirit! And friends and brothers and sisters in Christ can often see what we miss. We would be wise to listen to the counsel of wise Christians, especially when we get "dead set" on a course of action. Don't make the mistake David made. It was pride that caused David to go with Satan's idea, and it was pride that kept him from listening to the wise advice of his friend. When we look at what David did, we see that, even though he counted his soldiers, he failed to COUNT THE COST of sin. And the cost was terrible. David saw the error of his ways eventually, but it was too late to avoid the consequences. God spoke to David through a prophet named Gad, who went to David and said to him, *"This is what the Lord says: 'Take your choice: three years of famine, three months of being swept away before your enemies, with their swords overtaking you, or three days of the sword of the Lord — days of plague in the land ...'"* (21:11-12)

You might wonder, why would God give such deadly consequences for a little thing like taking a census? After all, taking a census ... in itself ... wasn't a sin. The whole book of NUMBERS is about counting almost everything in Israel. To understand the severity of the consequences, we have to understand the severity of the sin. God created the Nation of Israel so that His people could show the world what it was like to trust in the One True God. The whole point was that Israel would belong entirely to God. But David wanted to see how much strength he had without God. If the Nation of Israel operated independent of God, then God's plan would come to nothing. The sin of this census was huge and so God gave consequences that showed the enormity of the sin. After David was given three terrible choices – famine, enemies or plague, David said to Gad, *"I am in deep distress. Let me fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is very great; but do not let me fall into human hands. So the Lord sent a plague on Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead."* (21:13-14). David was the one who sinned, but the whole nation suffered for it. Of the 1,100,000 soldiers David had counted, 70,000 --- about 6% --- died of the plague.

We like to talk about "victim-less crimes." We'd like to imagine that when we sin, no one else will suffer for it. But that's not how it works. Divorce, for example, often hurts innocent children more than either former marriage partner. Addiction destroys the lives of those who depend on and love the addict. Church feuds do irreparable damage to new Christians and old ones too. If only we would stop and count the cost before we sin! David chose the 3rd of his 3 choices because he understood the nature of God. He knew that God would temper justice with mercy. And in verse 15 we read that God said to the avenging angel he had sent to destroy Jerusalem, "Enough! Withdraw your hand." The angel of the Lord was then standing at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. ALL would have been destroyed except for God's mercy. But there is more to this incident in David's life. Even after the punishing plague, the price for the sin had not been fully paid. This story reinforces a theme of the Old Testament: Sin always requires sacrifice.

God stopped the plague at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. Then he ordered David to build an altar and make a sin offering at that exact location. Araunah offered to give everything to David as a gift, but he would not take charity in a situation like this and said, *"I will not sacrifice what costs me nothing."* David paid Araunah 50 shekels of silver for the oxen and wooden yokes for fuel and paid 600 shekels of gold for the threshing floor on which the sacrifice would be made. David knew it was his own sin that required this sacrifice and he did what he could to pay the price himself.

Here's an interesting thing – it is believed that the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite is a really significant place. Not only is it the place where God had told Abraham to "Withdraw your hand" from sacrificing his son, Isaac about 950 years before, it is the very place where David's son Solomon would one day build the Temple of the Lord. But more than that, about 950 years after the Temple was built, not very far away on a little hill Jesus would be crucified. This piece of land was the place on our planet where God taught that **the cost of sin has to be sacrifice**. The threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite was the one location where repeated sacrifices were made throughout Biblical history, starting with Abraham's son, through David's armies, this became the location for countless thousands of temple sacrifices through the years - and then the place of the supreme sacrifice of God's own Son for the sins of the world – for your sins and mine. It was at the property David purchased for his altar that Jesus paid the final and complete sacrifice for all the sins of the world. On the cross, the great high priest sacrificed his own blood, once, and for all time, to save every sinner who has ever lived.

Have you dealt with the census form? If not, you need to complete it soon. But here's an even more important question – have you like David been counting on your own abilities, your own strengths, maybe even your good works to see you through? But what about your sin? It's separating you from God and there's a penalty that has to be paid for it. David had to pay the price for his sin with a sacrifice, but God has already provided a once and for all perfect sacrifice for your sin in the death of his Son the Lord Jesus on the cross. Sort out the census form, but don't neglect to sort out your salvation.

**Please meditate on the words of the hymn with which the church service ended.**

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| 1                                     | HOW sad our state by nature is!<br>Our sin, how deep it stains!<br>And Satan binds our captive souls<br>Fast in his slavish chains.    | 3 | My soul obeys the Almighty's call,<br>And runs to this relief;<br>I would believe thy promise, Lord;<br>O help my unbelief!       |
| 2                                     | But hark! a voice of sovereign grace<br>Sounds from the sacred word;<br>"Ho, ye despairing sinners, come,<br>And trust upon the Lord!" | 4 | To the blest fountain of thy blood,<br>Incarnate God, I fly;<br>Here let me wash my spotted soul<br>From sins of deepest dye.     |
| <i>Written by Isaac Watts in 1707</i> |  | 5 | A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,<br>Into thy hands I fall;<br>Be thou my strength and righteousness,<br>My Saviour, and my all. |

### **Important Notice**

As you will know, the main churches in Northern Ireland made a voluntary agreement with the Northern Ireland Executive to suspend all in-person gatherings, including services of worship. You may also have heard that this week, with the agreement of the Executive, the churches have all agreed that gathering together for services of worship may begin again from 2<sup>nd</sup> April - in time for Easter. The Kirk Sessions of Killead & Loanends met together during the week and have decided to take a cautious approach and not re-commence services in our meetinghouses until after Easter. In the meantime, our pre-recorded services and printed Thought for the Week will continue for each Sunday and there will also be a short meditation for Good Friday.