

Family Service

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Date: 27 March 2011

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] I've got something in this envelope. In fact, this envelope should have arrived at every single buddy's house in the past two weeks or so, I guess. We'll see what's in it and see if you've seen it at all. Maybe you have, maybe you haven't. Has anybody seen this in your house?

Your mom and dad will have got it in the last week or two. Do you know what it is? Does any of you know what it is? Any ideas? Yes. It's a census questionnaire, a census. Now, a census is basically a way in which the government finds out how many people live in Scotland. So, this is called Scotland Census, 2011. And the central day of this big effort to find out how many people live in Scotland is today. Look on that says 27th of March, 2011. So, that's today. So, today is census day. And in this documentary, in this questionnaire, which has lots of questions, there are lots of different questions. So, we don't only find out how many people live here, but the questions are about what kind of house we live in, how many rooms there are in each house, how many children there are in each house, how old they are, what kind of car we drive, if we've got a car, if we are going to school, if we're working, lots and lots and lots of questions. And it's very useful, the information, very useful because when the government has all this information and knows where everybody lives and how old people are, they can work out things like, how many houses are we going to need for all these people to live in? And what schools are we going to need? How many teachers? How many hospitals?

How many doctors? And all lots of very important things they can try and work out from the information that comes in a census. So, this needs to be filled in, I think by, oh, today or tomorrow at the latest.

So, if your mom and dad haven't done it, they must do it. And it says in the envelope, what does it say? Today, your response is required by law. You can have a thousand pound fine if you don't do it. So, that's the census. Now, this morning I want to tell you a true story from the Bible. And it's a story about a census that was organized by somebody you've all heard of, somebody called King David. Now, King David decided to organize a census. He wanted to count not how many people lived in all of his kingdom, but he wanted to count very especially how many soldiers he had in Israel. And this is what he wanted to do. And we could call it a census or a military census. How many soldiers do I have? How many men who are fit enough and old enough and strong enough to fight in my armies? So, that's what he decided to do. Now, David, you all know about David. David, when he decided to do this, had been king over Israel for many, many years. And he had been a very successful king. He himself was a fine soldier.

[3 : 18] He had won many, many victories over God's enemies. And from the very beginning, in all his battles, David had always realized that he had to put his trust in God. What was the first battle that David was involved in? Who was the first enemy that David defeated? You remember he was involved in a battle.

Yeah. Who was that? Quite right. That's right. Goliath. And you remember when David was fighting Goliath, at that time, he didn't have big armies. He didn't have chariots and horses. He just had five pebbles and a sling. That's all he had. So, you can imagine when he had to face this big giant called Goliath, he was very wise in trusting in God. He knew that he wouldn't be able to defeat Goliath by himself, so he trusted in God. He knew that without God, he couldn't win any victory. And David learned a lesson.

And as he grew stronger and stronger, he continued to remember that he had to trust in God, that in his own strength, he wouldn't be able to win all these victories. But if he trusted in God, he could. And so David did win many, many victories. And the more victories he won, the bigger his kingdom grew, the more and more famous he became, the more and more powerful he became, and more and more wealthy as the years went by. And of course, his armies grew and grew and grew.

And so, one day, he decided he would like to count all his soldiers to find out just how many soldiers he had. He knew that he had loads of soldiers, because even when he won victories against other countries, the young men from that country, they'd be roped in as well to be his soldiers. So he knew he had loads, but he wanted to know how many. So he organized a census. Now, I wonder if that was a good thing to do or a bad thing to do. I don't know what you think, but it doesn't seem like a terribly bad thing to do. What's wrong with counting how many soldiers you have? The census that we're having in Scotland today is a good thing. It's a good thing to know how many people live here. And we've given one or two reasons why it's useful, why it's a good thing to do. But what about what David was doing, counting all his soldiers? As I say, it doesn't sound like a terribly bad thing to do, but the Bible tells us that it was a very bad thing to do. The story that we're telling, we find in the

Bible, in a book called the book of Chronicles, 1 Chronicles chapter 21. And every so often, we'll make reference to and read one or two parts of that chapter that tells us about this census that David organized. And one of the things it does tell us very clearly is that David was wrong to do what he was doing. Now, I wonder why. Why was it wrong for David to count his soldiers? What was so sinful about that, to count his soldiers? Well, what is very clear is that the reason it was wrong is because David was doing it because he had become proud. Counting his soldiers itself wasn't a bad thing, but the reason he wanted to do it was a very bad thing. He had become proud. He had got to the point where he thought that all his victories and all his glory and all his success was because of his wisdom and of how great a person he was and how wonderfully large and powerful his army was. He had become proud. And pride is a very serious sin. When we're proud, really what we're doing is we're making ourselves very, very important and saying that God isn't important at all.

[7 : 16] That's what happens when we're proud. I'm very important. I'm very special. I'm very good. And because I'm so special and so good, well, I don't really need God. I don't need God to help me.

I can do everything I need to do all by myself. And that is pride. And it's a sin that we're all guilty of. And David was guilty of this serious sin of pride. That is why he wanted to count his soldiers.

David started, as we said, trusting in God. At the very beginning when he fought Goliath, he knew that he needed God's help. But now he was trusting not in God, but in his armies, in his soldiers, in his chariots, in all his power. And that's why he wanted to count his soldiers.

David was really saying, he was putting God to one side, and he was saying, I don't need God anymore. Now, when we think about it, that's a terrible thing for David to say. A terrible thing for David to think. All that God had done for him, everything that he had, all the success that he had, it had all come from God. And now, David turns his back on God and says, I don't need God anymore.

I can do things all by myself. It was a very terrible thing that David was doing. We have to be careful that we don't make the same mistake. Of course, we're not kings.

[8 : 45] We don't have big armies. We don't have soldiers that we can count. But we can also think that we don't need God. We can think about all the things that we have. Maybe we can count all the friends that we have. Or we can think about how clever we are. Or how good we are at football, or sport, or music. Or we think about how much money we've had. Maybe we've been saving up our pocket money, or the money that we've been given at Christmas, or birthday, and we've got quite a lot saved up.

And we're thinking about all these things. How big our house is. It's bigger than our friend's house. We think in that way, and we get proud. How important I am. How special I am. And of course, the more we think we're important and special, then the more we think that we don't really need God.

And because we don't really need God, we don't need to spend time praying. We don't need to worry about what God tells us in the Bible. We don't need to worry about going to church, or obeying all these boring rules that we find in the Bible. We can do things as we see best, just like David, when he wanted to count his soldiers. Well, let's get back to the story. David wants to count his soldiers, and so he calls one of his generals. And this general was called Joab. Now, Joab, we're told, was a very good man. He was a godly man. He trusted in God. And he was a very faithful man. He was faithful to David as his king, but he was also faithful to God. And Joab was David's trusted general. And he calls Joab, and he tells Joab the plan. He says, Joab, I want to count all the soldiers that we have. And you're the man who's going to take charge of this job for me. You're the man to do it. You always do everything I ask you. You never question me. You're

always obedient.

You're the man to count all my soldiers. Joab realized that the census was a very bad idea. In fact, it's thanks to Joab that we know it was a bad idea. If it wasn't for what Joab said, we might have thought, well, it's not such a bad thing. But Joab knew that this was a very bad idea.

[10:57] This was very wrong of David to do, that this was a sinful thing for David to do. Listen to what he says in that chapter that we find this story in. In 1 Chronicles chapter 21 and verse 3, David has asked Joab to do this census. And then we read how Joab replies. 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? Joab says to David, David, I wish you had a hundred times the amount of soldiers you have now. That would make me very happy that you would be more and more successful. But don't do this. Don't count all the soldiers.

Don't be proud. Your pride isn't only going to affect you. It's going to affect the whole nation. Don't do it. So Joab, he was very brave. Here was the king, the proud, powerful king. And he says, don't do it. This isn't a good idea. I am pleading with you. I'm warning you, don't do this.

And what does David say? What does David do faced with this warning from Joab? Did he listen? No, he doesn't listen. And why didn't he listen? Because he was too proud. You see, his pride had made him blind to good advice, to good advice from a good friend. He knew better. Well, that happened 3,000 years ago. But sometimes we can make the same mistake as David. Maybe you're thinking about doing something you know you shouldn't do. Or you think you shouldn't do. You're not very sure if it's the right thing to do. But you want to do it. And somebody who cares for you, maybe it's your mother or your father or a friend, says, don't do that. Don't go down that road. Don't do what you're thinking about doing. It's wrong. It will end in tears. It's not something that's pleasing to God.

And you're given good advice by your parents at Sunday school. Somebody gives you good advice. And sometimes we think, well, I know better. It's not that bad what I'm going to do. It's not that serious. It's not that sinful. I'll do what I want to do. I don't care what other people tell me or the advice I get. Well, that's what David did. He was given a chance. He was warned. But he wouldn't listen.

And to make matters worse, when we go back to the story, it's that David's sin in counting his soldiers involved other people. Other people were dragged in. Poor Joab, so faithful, so wise. And yet he has to obey these foolish orders that David is giving him. And as we think a little bit more about this story, the Bible gives us a weak clue to show just how proud and stupid David had become.

[14:05] I know sometimes we're told that we shouldn't use the word stupid about people, but David really was very stupid. And so we can call him stupid. And there is a weak clue in that chapter that tells us just how foolish David was and how proud he was in doing what he did. We're told in the chapter that Joab, even though he reluctantly counted the soldiers as David told him to, we're told that he didn't count the soldiers, or rather the men, who were part of the tribe of Levi. Now, you remember that Israel was made up of twelve tribes, really what originally were twelve families. And these families grew and grew and grew and grew, and they became tribes. And together, they made up the whole population. And one of the tribes was called the tribe of Levi. Now, why is that important? Because God in the Bible, in His orders that He had given, had given very clear instructions about this tribe.

And He said that the men from this tribe should not be soldiers. The men from this tribe should serve God in the temple. That was their job, not to be soldiers. But David says to Joab, count all the men.

Oh yes, all the men. I'm not going to waste good and strong men from the tribe of Levi serving in the temple. Oh no, that's going to make my army smaller. I want my army to be as big as possible. So you'll count them as well. You realize how proud he had become. He thought, well, the temple, that's not important. Worshiping God, that's not so important. Winning victories, winning battles, that's what's really important. None of this nonsense about the men from Levi not being soldiers. No, they can be soldiers too. And Joab, even though the king had ordered him, he said, I am not going to count these men because these men are not soldiers. God has said that they have another job to do. So in this little clue, we're just helped to understand that what David did really was very serious. He had fallen into very serious pride. He was throwing out God's law. He was leaving God to one side and doing what he thought was best. We can make the same kind of mistake as David.

We're not kings. We've said it already. We don't live in the same time or we don't have the same temptations that David had to count our soldiers. But we can make the mistake that David made of thinking that, well, the worship of God isn't really that important. He thought that the tribe of Levi, they'd be better employed being soldiers, not serving God. Sometimes we can think that. My life, my talents, my abilities, my money, my time, I'm going to use it for myself. I'm not going to waste all of that serving God and doing what God wants me to do. I'll do what I want to do. And when we think like that, we're making the same mistake that David made. Well, what happened as a result of David's sin? What happened? Well, the census was completed. And sure enough, David did have a huge army, over a million soldiers.

It was a huge army. That was true. But the very sad part of this story, the very solemn part of this story is that God punishes David, and the punishment is very severe. David is asked to choose between three punishments. He can have three years of famine, three months of being pursued by his enemies, three days of playing. And he chooses the three days of the play. Now, that might seem, compared to the other ones, not such a serious thing. But it was a terrible punishment, a very terrible punishment.

For those three days, there was death all over the land. The Bible tells us that 70,000 people died. Now, some of you have seen on the television about Japan and the earthquake and the tsunami, and that was terrible, wasn't it? And I think we're told that so far, they reckon about 10,000 people were killed. Well, in these three days in Israel, seven times as many people died because of this terrible plague. It was a very sad and terrible time. And this can be difficult for us to understand. [18:36] It doesn't seem fair that so many should suffer because of David's sin. He was the one who was wrong. He was the proud king. He was a sinner. Why do all these other people have to suffer?

Now, it's true that if God hadn't stopped David in his tracks by means of this terrible punishment, things could have been a lot worse. If David had continued on this way of being proud, no doubt the whole kingdom would have crumbled and many, many more people would have died in battles and wars. That's certainly true. But I would say this, that even when we don't fully understand the punishment that God sends in this account, there is still a very important lesson and warning for all of us. And it's this, that my sin and your sin affects other people. You see, other people suffer when we sin. Other people suffer when we are proud. Other people suffer when we are disobedient. And that is a lesson for us, and it's a very serious one. And we should take warning from that lesson, and not sin. If you want to be a blessing to others, to your family, to those you love, your friends, then the best way you can be a blessing is by trusting in God and obeying God. But back to the story.

What about David? Well, David finally realizes what he has done. He finally realizes the sin that he has committed. Listen to what he says. Well, just read what the Bible tells us he says when he realizes his sin. In verse 8 of chapter 21, in 1 Chronicles, it says, David confesses his sin. He realizes that his sin is serious. He says, I have sinned greatly.

He realizes that his pride and his disobedience is foolish. I have done a very foolish thing, very stupid thing. And he knows that he is guilty, and he needs to be forgiven. All of these things we discover in the words that David addresses to God. And that teaches us what we should do when we sin, when you sin, when you disobey God, when you're proud. What should you do? Well, you have to do what David did. Confess your sin. Recognize that you've been foolish. Recognize that sin is serious.

[21:19] That thing that you thought wasn't so serious, just like David. David thought that counting his soldiers, that's not a very serious matter. But then he realizes that it is. And so he recognizes that, and he confesses, and he asks God to forgive him. But what happens next in the story? Well, yes, David is truly sorry, but the punishment is still being carried out, the punishment for his sin.

And people are still dying from the plague. And we're told that at that point, David looks up. He recognizes that he has done wrong. And he is very distressed because of what he has done wrong. He's very distressed because he sees all that's happening because of what he has done. And he looks up. He looks up into the sky, and he sees an angel. It's an amazing thing. It must have been a remarkable thing for David. He sees an angel, and that angel is carrying a sword. And the sword he is carrying is over the great city of Jerusalem. And this angel is about to destroy the city, to kill more people in the city of Jerusalem. That's just about to happen. And David sees that. And David is terrified by what he sees. What does David do when he sees this? Well, let's just read what the

Bible says. David sees this, and then we're told in verse 17 that David said to God, was it not I who ordered the fighting men to be counted? I am the one who has sinned and done wrong.

These are but sheep. What have they done? Oh, Lord, my God, let your hand fall upon me and my family, but do not let the plague remain on your people. David says, it's not their fault. It's my fault. Punish me, kill me, destroy me, but not them. It's not their fault. And then what happens? Well, the Bible tells us that God was very distressed by the suffering of the people.

[23 : 13] And he addresses the angel. He says something to the angel. He says to the angel, enough, enough. No more plague. No more killing. No more destruction. God stops the angel from finishing what the angel had been sent to do. It was God who had sent the angel. And God said, enough, enough.

The punishment is cut short. Now, can God do that? Can God just decide not to punish sin? Can God see me sinning or you sinning and look down and say, well, that's a terrible thing he's doing, and I don't like it, but I won't bother punishing him. Punishment is such a horrible thing to do. That's okay. Just try and be better next time. But we won't worry about punishment. No, no, we don't need to do that. Can God do that? Can God just say, well, I won't bother punishing sin? God can't do that. God is holy. God's character as a holy God and a just God means that He must punish sin. To punish sin is the right thing to do. Sin deserves to be punished.

So what does God do in this story? And this is bringing us right to the end of the story. God tells David to do something. He tells David to build an altar. And on that altar, David is to sacrifice an animal. And that sacrifice will be a sacrifice for his sin.

[24 : 42] That's what God tells David to do. And David, of course, does it just as God tells him. He builds the altar. He places the animal sacrifice. And he prays to God that God would forgive him.

And then something even more remarkable happens in the story. Even more remarkable, I think, than David looking up and seeing this angel with a sword. The altar is there. The animal is there. The sacrifice is there. And David is praying to God, asking for forgiveness. And then we're told that God sent fire from heaven. You know, fire is used as punishment. And God sends fire from heaven. And what does the fire do? The fire burns up the animal on the altar. Now, just think for a moment what's happening here. David has said, I'm the guilty one. I did what was wrong. Punish me. That fire really should have been for David. That fire should have been to burn up David. That would have been justice. But the fire, instead of burning up David, burns up the animal. You see, the animal took the punishment in David's place. The punishment that David deserved, he didn't receive. The animal, the sacrifice on the altar, is the one that receives the punishment that David was due. That is what happens in the story. Now, maybe all this sounds a little bit strange to us, animals and sacrifices.

But you know, that tells us something very, very important about Jesus. It tells us about Jesus. It points to Jesus because Jesus did what that animal sacrifice was doing. Jesus, when he died in the cross, he took the punishment for your sin and for my sin. He died in our place. Just like that animal that God had said to David, sacrifice an animal, and the fire from heaven consumed the animal.

[26 : 44] So Jesus, when he died on the cross, when he hung on the cross, he was dying, taking the punishment for our sin. And the punishment of God, the just punishment of God over sin, rested on Jesus instead of on us.

And that is a wonderful thing. God loves us so much that he sent his own son, Jesus, to die in our place, to take the punishment that we deserve, that we would be spared that punishment, punishment we deserve, but that God, because he loves us, places on another on his own son. There's a final part to the story. David is forgiven. He confesses his sins. He asks God to forgive him. He prepares a sacrifice as God had told him to, and God burns the animal rather than consuming David.

But there's a final thing. The piece of land where that altar had been built belonged to a man who lived in Jerusalem called Araunah. And that piece of land where God had told David to build the altar was to be the piece of land where the temple would be built. Solomon's temple, this wonderful temple that was built by David's son Solomon. And the temple was to be the place where the people of God would gather to serve God and to worship God. And so there God was saying that when you are forgiven, you're forgiven for a purpose, that you would serve God, that you would worship God. And so when we are forgiven, when we sin like David's sins, when we're proud, when we do things that we think aren't that serious, but then we discover that in God's sight they are serious, and when we ask God to forgive us, he does forgive us. And he's able to forgive us

because of what Jesus has done for us. Jesus has taken the punishment. But when we're forgiven, what we then must do is live our lives serving God and worshiping God, just like David and the people of Israel did when they were forgiven their sins.

So that's a story from the Bible, in some ways quite a difficult story, quite a hard story to understand, lots of things that we find difficult, but a story that tells us very important truths about God and about Jesus. And I want you, when you hear about a census, today there's a census in Scotland, maybe in school your teachers will tell you something about the census, or in the news you'll hear about the census, or you'll hear the results of the census, how many people there are in Scotland, and all kinds of information. I want you to remember when you hear about a census, remember this time when David was very foolish, very sinful, and very proud. And remember the terrible consequences of that, but remember also that when we are sinful, when we disobey God, God is gracious, and He's ready to forgive us. And He's provided a way how we can be forgiven by sending His Son to die for us in our place. So let's ask God to forgive us. Let's receive the forgiveness that He gives, and as we receive it, so live our lives serving Him and worshiping Him. Let's pray.