

2 SAMUEL—WEEK 16

WHAT'S IMPORTANT



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Bathing Bathsheba by Artemisia Gentileschi (1593 – 1656)
On display in the Neues Palais in Potsdam, Germany*

Second Samuel wraps up with some complex lessons about faith and our relationship with God. Things that seem important in the secular world are shown to be unimportant.

David learns this the hard way.

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2 Samuel, Week 16 — What's Important

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1 2 Samuel 23:8–17 (ESV)

These are the names of the mighty men whom David had: Josheb-basshebeth a Tahchemonite; he was chief of the three. He wielded his spear against eight hundred whom he killed at one time.

And next to him among the three mighty men was Eleazar the son of Dodo, son of Ahohi. He was with David when they defied the Philistines who were gathered there for battle, and the men of Israel withdrew. He rose and struck down the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand clung to the sword. And the LORD brought about a great victory that day, and the men returned after him only to strip the slain.

And next to him was Shammah, the son of Agee the Hararite. The Philistines gathered together at Lehi, where there was a plot of ground full of lentils, and the men fled from the Philistines. But he took his stand in the midst of the plot and defended it and struck down the Philistines, and the LORD worked a great victory.

And three of the thirty chief men went down and came about harvest time to David at the cave of Adullam, when a band of Philistines was encamped in the Valley of Rephaim. David was then in the stronghold, and the garrison of the Philistines was then at Bethlehem. And David said longingly, “Oh, that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!” Then the three mighty men broke through the camp of the Philistines and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate and carried and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it. He poured it out to the LORD and said, “Far be it from me, O LORD, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?” Therefore he would not drink it. These things the three mighty men did.

The Hebrew word in the first sentence that's translated as “chief” (רֹאשׁ, rosh) is literally “head.” When combined with ha-shannah (the year) we get rosh hashanah—the head of the year (the Jewish new year). *Josheb-basshebeth* was head of the three “mighty men.” These three are the chiefs of all the others.

The word rosh is again translated as “chief” in verse 13 in reference to *the thirty chief men*.

The point is that David's mighty men weren't just great fighters; they were leaders.

The incident with the water *from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate* can be puzzling. David's actions look, at first glance, to be insulting to the men who brought him the water. But note that this was not about being thirsty; they had plenty of water. The water from *the well of Bethlehem* might be tasty but not in any way that matters. David asking for a taste of it was either a flippant comment or some kind of a “mission impossible” challenge.

The mighty men who broke through enemy lines to get a drink of water were not meeting a need that David had. They were trying to achieve something mighty. The text doesn't say whether David put them up to it or if they brashly decided to take an unserious comment seriously.

In either case, David pouring out the water *to the LORD* is showing great respect for their heroic feat.

2 2 Samuel 23:18–39 (ESV)

Now Abishai, the brother of Joab, the son of Zeruiah, was chief of the thirty. And he wielded his spear against three hundred men and killed them and won a name beside the three. He was the most renowned of the thirty and became their commander, but he did not attain to the three.

And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was a valiant man of Kabzeel, a doer of great deeds. He struck down two ariels of Moab. He also went down and struck down a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen. And he struck down an Egyptian, a handsome man. The Egyptian had a spear in his hand, but Benaiah went down to him with a staff and snatched the spear out of the Egyptian's hand and killed him with his own spear. These things did Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and won a name beside the three mighty men. He was renowned among the thirty, but he did not attain to the three. And David set him over his bodyguard.

Asahel the brother of Joab was one of the thirty; Elhanan the son of Dodo of Bethlehem, Shammah of Harod, Elikah of Harod, Helez the Paltite, Ira the son of Ikkesh of Tekoa, Abiezer of Anathoth, Mebunnai the Hushathite, Zalmon the Ahohite, Maharai of Netophah, Heleb the son of Baanah of Netophah, Ittai the son of Ribai of Gibeah of the people of Benjamin, Benaiah of Pirathon, Hiddai of the brooks of Gaash, Abi-albon the Arbathite, Azmaveth of Bahurim, Eliahba the Shaalbonite, the sons of Jashen, Jonathan, Shammah the Hararite, Ahiam the son of Sharar the Hararite, Eliphelet the son of Ahasbai of Maacah, Eliam the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite, Hezro of Carmel, Paarai the Arbite, Igal the son of Nathan of Zobah, Bani the Gadite, Zelek the Ammonite, Naharai of Beeroth, the armor-bearer of Joab the son of Zeruiah, Ira the Ithrite, Gareb the Ithrite, Uriah the Hittite: thirty-seven in all.

The list of David's thirty mighty men actually includes more than thirty men. No one is sure how to reconcile this. Possible explanations include that thirty is just a round number, or a euphemism for a group (like a platoon), or the name "thirty" stuck even after more were added (like the "Big Ten" conference), or that the complete list includes replacements for those who were killed in action.

The number of men isn't important, but two specifics about this list are. First, Joab doesn't make the list. This is astonishing given Joab's major roles throughout David's lifetime. He was David's right-hand man more often than not. He commanded the whole army.

Joab's name appears twice in this passage, but only in regard to others. This serves to highlight it's absence. That's by design. Long lists like this tend to bury individual names. It'd be easy to not notice that Joab isn't there, but the two mentions of his name draw attention to the absence.

This is Joab's final punishment for disobeying David's order to protect Absalom..

Secondly, saving the name of Uriah the Hittite until the end is also by design. This highlights the fact that David didn't try to cover up his adultery by knocking off some random soldier; he killed one of his mighty men.

God, and His scripture, aren't going to just let this go.

3 2 Samuel 24:1–8

Again the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel, and He moved David against them to say, “Go, number Israel and Judah.”

So the king said to Joab the commander of the army who was with him, “Now go throughout all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and count the people, that I may know the number of the people.”

And Joab said to the king, “Now may the LORD your God add to the people a hundred times more than there are, and may the eyes of my lord the king see it. But why does my lord the king desire this thing?” Nevertheless the king’s word prevailed against Joab and against the captains of the army. Therefore Joab and the captains of the army went out from the presence of the king to count the people of Israel.

And they crossed over the Jordan and camped in Aroer, on the right side of the town which is in the midst of the ravine of Gad, and toward Jazer. Then they came to Gilead and to the land of Tahtim Hodshi; they came to Dan Jaan and around to Sidon; and they came to the stronghold of Tyre and to all the cities of the Hivites and the Canaanites. Then they went out to South Judah as far as Beersheba. So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days.

This final chapter in Second Samuel teaches a tough lesson. Part of what makes it tough is the parallel report in First Chronicles.

Now Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel. So David said to Joab and to the leaders of the people, “Go, number Israel from Beersheba to Dan, and bring the number of them to me that I may know it.”— 1 Chronicles 21:1–2

So, was it the LORD or was it Satan?

It has to be both. The only way to reconcile these two accounts is to see this as similar to the beginning of the book of Job. The LORD is letting Satan off his leash a bit.

The LORD is the first cause of all things. In this case, as in Job, Satan is the second cause.

This teaching is hard to accept, but it’s all over Scripture. In addition to today’s passages and the ones in Job, there’s the account of the Egyptian plagues in Exodus. Sometimes the text says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart; other times God hardened it.

And then there’s this:

“And the Lord said, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail;” — Luke 22:31–32a

Jesus implies that Satan has to ask for permission to sift Simon as wheat. More importantly, He says that He prayed for Simon to pass the trial, not for him to be spared it. The implications are huge.

Everything that happens—everything—is under the LORD’s authority.

4 2 Samuel 24:9–14

Then Joab gave the sum of the number of the people to the king. And there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men.

And David's heart condemned him after he had numbered the people. So David said to the Lord, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, I pray, O LORD, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly."

Now when David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, "Go and tell David, 'Thus says the LORD: "I offer you three things; choose one of them for yourself, that I may do it to you." ' " So Gad came to David and told him; and he said to him, "Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land? Or shall you flee three months before your enemies, while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' plague in your land? Now consider and see what answer I should take back to Him who sent me."

And David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man."

What's so sinful about taking a census? The US constitution mandates one every ten years. Is that wrong?

No, but David's census was different. It wasn't of all the people; it was just of the *valiant men who drew the sword*. He was measuring the potential size of his army! What was he planning?

It doesn't matter what he was planning, or even if he was planning anything. Measuring the size of his army demonstrates a lack of reliance on the LORD. As we've seen, the LORD doesn't need a big army.

The LORD said to Gideon, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.' ... And the LORD said to Gideon, "With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home." — Judges 7:2,7 (ESV)

What happened here is like David "forgot" that he's a believer. He didn't outright deny the things he knows; they just seemed to slip his mind. When reminded, he did the right thing, but that was pretty late.

This "forgetting" happens to us too. We're all born without any understanding of God. We learn to walk and talk independent of religion. Then readin', writin', and 'rithmetic are taught for their own sakes, typically without reference to God. We grow up wired to understand things in purely secular terms.

So, when we become "God aware" that new understanding is layered on top of a secular structure of what understanding is. The original wiring is still there. That wiring is what allows us to understand the gospel, but it functions independent of the gospel. All the day to day operations of life happen normally independent of any God awareness. We can, for example, catch a football without thinking about God.

So, being "God aware" when we're doing something takes deliberate effort. It's easy to forget.

5 2 Samuel 24:15–25 (ESV)

So the LORD sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning until the appointed time. And there died of the people from Dan to Beersheba 70,000 men. And when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented from the calamity and said to the angel who was working destruction among the people, "It is enough; now stay your hand." And the angel of the LORD was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. Then David spoke to the LORD when he saw the angel who was striking the people, and said, "Behold, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father's house."

And Gad came that day to David and said to him, "Go up, raise an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." So David went up at Gad's word, as the LORD commanded. And when Araunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. And Araunah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground. And Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" David said, "To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be averted from the people." Then Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him. Here are the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. All this, O king, Araunah gives to the king." And Araunah said to the king, "May the LORD your God accept you." But the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. And David built there an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the LORD responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.

David's guilt is magnified by watching others punished for his sin. His repentance is almost frantic.

So when Gad shows up with a prescription to end this nightmare, David jumps at the chance. He needs to build *an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite*. Seems simple enough, right?

Then a blessing comes up that David rightly detects as an impediment—Araunah wants to help David by giving him the threshing floor along with all the animals for the sacrifice.

That sounds great—too great. David rejects Araunah's gracious offer saying, *"No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing."*

It's not a sacrifice if you don't sacrifice.

Repentance by proxy is worthless; you can't just mail it in. This is one of the few places where the adage, "No pain, no gain," fits. If the pain and shame is bearable, it may not be enough.

Consider an insincere apology (sometimes called a non-apology apology). It's not only useless; it can be insulting. Mouthing a few humble words is a waste of time if you don't even state what you did wrong.

This is the perfect intro to a study of the book of James. Conversion has to be life-changing to be real.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Who have you known personally who was a great leader?
2. Where do we see things emphasized by being notably absent?
3. Who is Satan?
4. How can we be more "God aware"?
5. Have you ever "worked off" a wrong?

Items for prayer: