

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Costly Sacrifice

2 Samuel 24.24

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2 Samuel 24:24....“I will not offer sacrifice to the Lord my God that cost me nothing.”

That arresting statement is at the heart of the worship of God. The story that brought it to life reaches deep to the heart of the people of God. I will not offer sacrifice; I will not offer prayer; I will not offer worship to the Lord that costs me nothing.

It's near the end of David's life. David was the King of Israel, a man who made plenty of mistakes but who wanted to do right by God. His story is told in 2 Samuel. This is the very end of that story. A man named Araunah the Jebusite owned a threshing floor that David the King desperately wanted to buy to build an altar for God. A threshing floor is where heads of wheat are crushed to release the grain for making bread. Bread from the grain from that threshing floor had surely made it to David's dinner plate. Men's boots or oxen hooves would go round and round stomping on the stalks. So, the area was large and flat. And it was on a high place so the wind could blow away the chaff leaving behind the grain which would then be ground to make flour for bread. In other words, it's a barnyard on a nice piece of real estate.

David could have just taken it by force. He was the king after all, but he wouldn't do that. He wouldn't even accept it as a gift. No, he said, “I will not offer sacrifice to the Lord my God that costs me nothing.” It was a workplace. A barn. A common place for common people doing the most common things, making bread. But in David's eyes, after the *incident*, it is as a place of grace. It is a meeting place of the grace of God and the suffering of the people of God. And so, it was just the place for the worship of God by the people of God. This ordinary barnyard.

Charles Spurgeon once asked, “Does it astonish you [that God would be met in a barn? Why not? God met Adam in a Garden, Abraham under a tree, and Noah in an ark. There is less of man in the open field than in the cathedral, and where there is least of man there is at least an opportunity to find most of God. Meet God on a threshing floor? Why not? God has met with man in a dungeon, in a cave, in a whale's belly. When you have displayed all your skill in architecture, can you secure any more of the Divine presence than the disciples had in the upper room? God chose a threshing floor for his audience with David, just as he had chosen to reveal himself in a bush to Moses. His presence had been glorious on the sandy floor of the wilderness, and now it was gracious among the sheaves and the oxen . . .

“It was a place of ordinary toil, and an everyday place, that none could have been more so: as if the Lord will say to us, “I will meet you anywhere. I will be with you in the house and in the field; I will speak with you when you till the ground, when you thresh your corn, when you eat your bread. Every place is holy where a holy heart is found.” (Spurgeon, “The Threshing Floor of Ornan”)

That's a beautiful sentiment, that every place is holy where a holy heart is found, and this whole account of David wanting to acquire a barnyard where he will build an altar hits close to home here because this sanctuary sits almost directly on the foundation of the old barn of the Methodist Children's Home's West Farm. From the 1920s-1960s this land and about 100 acres around it was the playground and work ground of children cared for by the Children's Home. They played here in these trees and worked in these fields and sometimes camped here at night. Peach and plum trees, wheat and corn, pigs, cows, chickens. You're worshipping on a farm. Many of you have been baptized down in the old cow trough.

If we take off from the biblical story in that direction, that would be a nice reflection on this ordinary and sacred space, and the cost of worshipping God here to the individual who gave this land to DaySpring, to those who stepped out and up on faith to clear this land and build this church, and the cost in labor and in money to continue to worship here. We've come a long way, but I don't think anyone thinks our work is done here on this land. And that's going to be costly. Everything worthwhile is. Oooh, this story could pick our pockets!

But that's not actually this story. It's not a stewardship sermon story about a piece of land. It's a sacrifice story about life and death. Every place is holy where a holy heart is found. David's heart, as we see, is certainly willing, but is it holy?

We're in chapter 24. In chapter 21, Israel is in famine. They are desperate for relief. There, meet the Gibeonites, a small group of foreigners who had lived in the land since the time of Joshua. Their old peace treaty with Israel had been broken by David's predecessor, Saul, when he sacked their city and killed many of them. That wrong in their eyes had never been made right. Now they come to David and propose that the blood of their ancestors must be avenged by the blood of Saul's descendants. Give us Saul's sons, they said. And if you do, justice will be served, God will be satisfied, and this famine will end.

This Gibeonite theology proposed that the famine would be ended if David allowed them to revenge the old deaths. But when had God ever required a human sacrifice? David knew the pain of his own child's death, and he knew well the cost of war in blood and bodies. But this isn't hardly the same thing. What they asked for was the ritual murder of 7 innocent people, children of the former king.

What would David do? What would you do? I know it's an outlandish question, but in desperate, fearful times, people do things they wouldn't ordinarily do. Leaders do, too. Usually though what they do is make sacrifices that cost other people something. In war, in politics, the mobs and the leaders who listen to them are often more than willing for other people to sacrifice so they don't have to suffer. God's people were supposed to be different in the world, a people who bore the burdens of others, who took on their suffering and helped lighten their load. God's people are willing to sacrifice for the good of others, not make them sacrifice for their own comfort and security. But God's people sometimes forget who they are. Even their leaders.

“David, give us seven sons and we’ll kill them.”

David. Doesn’t. Blink.

And he doesn’t pray about it. I will do this thing, he says, and he rounds up and hands over 2 living sons and 5 living grandsons of Saul. All Israel must have been behind him. Whatever it takes, even sacrificing the innocent. The Gibeonites hung them before the Lord as the opening ceremony of a dystopian harvest festival. Eventually rains came and the famine ended, but not because of this. This was not a prayer. This was not in honor of God. This was not a sacrifice God desired. What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God?

The next two chapters are full of David’s songs and praise, but you can’t piously sing your way out of this. Take away from me your spiritual songs, but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. There aren’t enough thoughts and prayers to paper over willing participation in the deaths of innocence.

Chapter 24 opens with the anger of the Lord stewing against all of Israel, David and everyone for this. God instructs David to count the people, all of them. It’s often thought that David sinned in doing this census and that caused the problems to follow, but I don’t think that’s the right way to read this story. The sin wasn’t the census. The sin was human sacrifice in an attempt to appease a God they forgot they knew already and treated like a stranger. The census wasn’t the sin; it was the ominous prelude. You who are willing to count to 7, how about 70×7 , or $70,000 \times 7$.

When the count was complete. David has the numbers and the message. Hundreds of thousands not just under his command but under his care. Hundreds of thousands who will suffer, and they did. A plague rips through the people. Thousands die. David watches in sorrow and horror as so many suffer and die. Finally, when death came up the mountain and into Jerusalem, in a dramatic scene, God tells the destroying angel, “Enough. It is enough”. It is at the same moment that David is praying, finally, praying a true prayer, “I have sinned, and I have done wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and my house.”

The people of God have worshipped in soaring cathedrals, illumined by stain glass windows and in converted basketball arenas and in open fields and under the meaty shade of live oak trees and at least once by a repentant and desperate man outside a barnyard. On his knees before the Lord, David looked up and saw the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, the very place where the suffering came to a stop. The place of animals and working men, and wheat and bread was the place where the healing would begin. Through his tears David saw for the first time a holy place. Araunah, let me buy this from you for an altar to the Lord.

Araunah offered, Take it all. I give it to you. It’s all yours, my king.

That's when David replied, "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." He who had been willing for others to sacrifice for him, now is changed, here at the end of his life. Life is not about accumulating goods from the sacrifices of others. It is ultimately about giving our lives away for the community of others and the community of all creation. The story of David, man after god's own heart, ends with David making a personal sacrifice so that others might live another day on earth. This was the only piece of land in the promised land not acquired by force but by agreement, by purchase.

It was bought with gold and silver and prayers and tears, with suffering and repentance. David paid dearly, not just in money, but in his own soul, his own broken heart. Here, at the end of his life, he was only beginning to really know his God. God didn't need a sacrifice to be appeased. God desired hearts that were fully his.

David bought that threshing floor and built his altar on the threshing floor he acquired from the foreigner, the Jebusite. On that very place, David's son Solomon built the temple of God. This is the backstory of the temple of Jerusalem.

The sacred ground of the temple was the very place where the suffering of God's people met the grace of God's mercy; divinity and humanity fallen out of joint would reconcile there. The old vengeful ways of other gods were finally rejected in the light of the God of grace.

The literal ground of the temple was first an ordinary place of grain and grapes, bread and wine. The holy place of prayer was first the ground of ordinary work. The architecture of identity with the God of Israel was first a place where a Gentile and Jew shook hands in peaceful and gracious cooperation. The very soil under the temple was trod with the hooves of oxen and the shoes of men and women preparing bread to feed the hungry.

The two books of Samuel opened with the story of an Israelite woman begging for a while in the temple of Shiloh and ends with the buying of land where the great temple of Jerusalem will be constructed. Finally, David—called in as a boy from the shepherding fields becomes the shepherd of Israel—prophet, priest, king—on his knees praying mercy for his sheep and ready to make personal sacrifice to save the capital of Israel and his people.

And it was his son who fulfilled the gesture of his ancestor. Over the head of Jesus, onto the cross was nailed in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek the words "This is the King of Israel". They had no idea the fullness of truth of their words. This is the king of the Jews, he who himself was the living temple of God. Tear this down, and in three days, I will raise it up again. And he did. He is now the solid rock on which we stand, in our work and in our prayer, in our love for one another and in our love for God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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