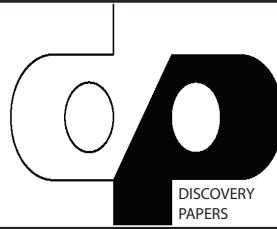


# ON THE ROAD

**SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:  
THE STORY OF DAVID.**



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2 Samuel 24:1-25  
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*2 Samuel 24:1-25*

*New York Times* columnist David Brooks, in his bestselling book *The Road to Character*, confesses:

*I've also become more aware that, like many people these days, I have lived a life of vague moral aspiration—vaguely wanting to be good, vaguely wanting to serve some larger purpose, while lacking a concrete moral vocabulary, a clear understanding of how to live a rich inner life, or even a clear knowledge of how character is developed and depth is achieved. (Brooks xvi.)*

In the book Brook profiles admirable individuals from bygone eras who “practiced a mode of living that is less common now. They were actually aware of their own weaknesses. They waged an internal struggle against their sins and emerged with some measure of self-respect. And when we think of them, it is not primarily what they accomplished that we remember—great through that may have been—it is who they were.” (Brooks xvi.)

Brooks confesses that his motivation for delving into the lives of such individuals, and, indeed, for writing *The Road to Character*: “I wrote it, to be honest, to save my own soul.” (Brooks xiii.)

For ten months now, we have delved into the life of David. It turns out that we learn from David, especially in 2 Samuel 24, what Brooks learned from profiling the individuals in his book. We learn to traverse a challenging but important stretch on the road to character.

In 2 Samuel 24, near the end of his story, we see the best of David and the worst of David. First, we see the worst.

## David orders a census

**2 Samuel 24:1-9:**

**Now again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, “Go, number Israel and Judah.” 2 The king**

**said to Joab the commander of the army who was with him, “Go about now through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and register the people, that I may know the number of the people.” 3 But Joab said to the king, “Now may the Lord your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see; but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?” 4 Nevertheless, the king’s word prevailed against Joab and against the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to register the people of Israel. 5 They crossed the Jordan and camped in Aroer, on the right side of the city that is in the middle of the valley of Gad and toward Jazer. 6 Then they came to Gilead and to [the land of Tahtim-hodshi, and they came to Dan-jaan and around to Sidon, 7 and came to the fortress of Tyre and to all the cities of the Hivites and of the Canaanites, and they went out to the south of Judah, to Beersheba. 8 So when they had gone about through the whole land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. 9 And Joab gave the number of the registration 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.**

When was the anger of the Lord previously kindled against Israel? Perhaps the narrator has in mind the famine of 2 Samuel 21, which the Lord brought about because of Saul’s treatment of the Gibeonites. Also, the parallels between 2 Samuel 24 and 2 Samuel 6 may indicate that the narrator is thinking of when “the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah” for taking hold of the ark of the covenant. Back then, David himself responded to the Lord’s anger by getting angry (2 Samuel 6:6-8). But why is the Lord angry this time? The narrator doesn’t say. How does the Lord express his anger? By inciting David to order a census, which raises two perplexing questions.

First, because conducting a census in this chapter is seen as a sinful act, does the Lord cause David to sin? James says God “tempts no one” to sin (James 1:13). The author of 1 Chronicles, in his account, says “Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel” (1 Chronicles 21:1). Putting the two accounts together, we might conclude that Satan incited David to sin and that the Lord used David’s sin to discipline Israel. Similarly, the Lord invited Satan to consider an attack against Job and then granted him access (Job 1:8-12).

We tread lightly on thorny theological ground. The mystery of evil is, in some ways, a mystery. But we can say this with certainty: God is sovereign over evil and draws it up into his purposes. What did God do with sin? He nailed it to the cross. Apart from sin, we never would have seen the glory of God in the face of Christ. Creation was perfect, but sin wrecked it. Nevertheless, when you put Genesis 1-2 next to Revelation 21-22, you realize that the new creation will outshine the old creation, sinless though it was. God draws sin up into his purposes.

Second, what’s wrong with taking a census? In times past, the Lord commanded Moses to take a census for the purpose of raising an army (Numbers 1:1-3). When David takes his census, it is reported that there are 800,000 troops in the north and 500,000 troops in the south. So what’s right about counting troops in Numbers and what’s wrong about it in 2 Samuel? Again, the narrator doesn’t say. It may have something to do with motives: in Numbers, Moses responded to the Lord’s command, but in 2 Samuel, no such command is reported. Perhaps David is trusting in his numbers instead of the Lord’s power. In any event, Joab, David’s commander, tries to talk him out of it, and even David himself, upon reflection, confesses wrongdoing.

At this point, however, David is defiant: he rebuffs Joab and orders the census. After completing the census, however, David has second thoughts.

## **David’s heart strikes him**

### **2 Samuel 24:10-14:**

**Now David’s heart troubled him after he had numbered the people. So David said to the Lord, “I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, please take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have acted very foolishly.” 11 When David arose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the**

**prophet Gad, David’s seer, saying, 12 “Go and speak to David, ‘Thus the Lord says, “I am offering you three things; choose for yourself one of them, which I will do to you.”” 13 So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, “Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days’ pestilence in your land? Now consider and see what answer I shall return to Him who sent me.” 14 Then David said to Gad, “I am in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man.”**

At other times, when David sinned against the Lord, others confronted him, and he repented. David’s repentance in those cases, especially as a king who could pull rank, is remarkable enough. This time, even more remarkably, David confronts himself. He says, “I have sinned greatly in what I have done.” David is willing to confront hard truths about himself. This is the best of David.

After David’s sins against Bathsheba and Uriah, the Lord “put away” David’s sin but nevertheless said, through the prophet Nathan, that there would be repercussions (2 Samuel 12:10-14). Now, David asks the Lord to “take away” his sin, but again, the Lord, through the prophet Gad, says there will be repercussions.

In this case, the Lord instructs David to choose among three options. David, though, doesn’t choose one. He eliminates one (fleeing from foes for three months), but he doesn’t choose between the other two (three years of famine and three days of pestilence). Instead, he casts himself on the mercy of the Lord.

If indeed David ordered the census because he was trusting in his power and not the Lord’s, this choice represents a remarkable turnaround. He would have no ability to stop a famine or pestilence, but conceivably he would have a chance to outrun his foes for three months. He’s done so before, in fact. For many years, as a fugitive of Saul, he lived on the run. He knows how to outrun foes. Nevertheless, he rules out the only option that would have given him a fighting chance to get off scot-free.

David trusts the Lord to the extent that he doesn’t do what the Lord tells him to do. He doesn’t “choose one of them.” Instead, he chooses the Lord. And he lets the Lord choose.

In this respect, David's response foreshadows that of the Syrophenician woman, who was pushed to the edge by Jesus when he told her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She pushed back: "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:24-30).

The perplexing theological question posed by 2 Samuel 24 causes us to marvel all the more at David. It's clear that the Lord incited David to sin because of Israel's sin (even if we don't know what Israel's sin was). It's also clear, based on 1 Chronicles 21:1, that Satan incited David to sin. It's unclear what David did wrong. Nevertheless, remarkably, David blames neither God nor Satan nor the people. He takes full responsibility for his actions.

That's the kind of leader you want: someone who evaluates herself honestly, who knows his weaknesses, who takes full responsibility for her actions, for as that famous theologian, Clint Eastwood (Dirty Harry) observes in *Magnum Force*: "A man's got to know his limitations."

## Confront yourself

David's heart struck him. Does your heart ever strike you? David realized, all by himself, that he had done wrong. When our heart strikes us in this way, we too realize that we have done wrong.

I wonder, though, if our hearts strike us more than we know. Most of us really enjoy being right and really dislike being wrong. For many of us, to be wrong means to feel inferior. We therefore guard against feeling inferior. We are therefore reticent to admit wrongdoing, even to ourselves.

Or, if we manage to acknowledge wrongdoing, we can find all kinds of reasons for our wrongdoing other than our own culpability. Our parents are responsible. The bullies are responsible. Satan is responsible. God is responsible, not least for giving me such parents, surrounding me with such bullies, and allowing Satan such access.

The other day, I was cooking dinner and I bumped into a cabinet door that had been left open. My first inclination was to blame the person who left the cabinet door open. Then I realized that I was the one who had left it open. My second inclination was to complain

about having to cook dinner. Then I realized that I had volunteered to cook dinner. Literally in less than a second, I sought to blame at least two other people for my predicament, when in reality, I was to blame. Something within me resists taking the blame, even for wrongdoing that is quite obviously my fault. I need to confront that part of me.

There is value in considering how you were reared and other environmental factors to understand how you may be predisposed to particular sins. But if you keep blaming others for your sins to keep from feeling inferior, you also keep yourself from the mercy of God. If you take the entire responsibility for wrongdoing, then you can cast yourself entirely on the mercy of God.

The basic meaning of the word translated "confess" in the New Testament (*homologeō*) is to "say the same thing" as another. When we confess, we're saying the same thing as God about what we've done. God doesn't want sinlessness; God wants honesty. David, in his great psalm of confession, Psalm 51, writes of God, "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being" (Psalm 51:6).

I am adamant that my children be honest with themselves and with their parents, so much so that I have been known to praise them for their honesty when they confessed wrongdoing. I suppose there is danger in this: that they would become unconcerned with wrongdoing, knowing that that they can simply confess and receive praise. But I don't think they've ever come anywhere near using my praise as a license for sin.

## Not an easy road

David Brooks observes, "We live in a culture that teaches us to promote and advertise ourselves and to master the skills required for success, but that gives little encouragement to humility, sympathy, and honest self-confrontation, which are necessary for building character." (Brooks xiii.) He adds, "The mental space that was once occupied by moral struggle has gradually become occupied by the struggle to achieve. Morality has been displaced by utility." (Brooks 259.)

Especially in light of such cultural influences, the road to character is not an easy one. Some people, however, including those Brooks profiles in his book, have managed to walk it. How do you do so? You do it the way David did it: by confronting yourself. The road to character passes through self-confrontation.

Even a secular observer such as Brooks agrees:

*"It doesn't matter if you work on Wall Street or at a charity distributing medicine to the poor. It doesn't matter if you are at the top of the income scale or at the bottom. There are heroes and schmucks in all worlds. The most important thing is whether you are willing to engage in moral struggle against yourself." (Brooks 13.)*

*"Character is built in the course of your inner confrontation." (Brooks 263.)*

Like David, you have to be willing to confront yourself.

One of the ways to confront yourself is by using one form or another of the ancient "Prayer of Examen," in which you ask the Lord to help you review the events of a certain period of time in your life (a day, a week, a month) while paying special attention to what you were feeling at the time and even what you're feeling now, looking back. Also, use David's prayer in Psalm 139:23-24:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!  
Try me and know my thoughts!  
And see if there be any grievous way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting!

Confront yourself. Then cast yourself on the mercy of God. That's what David does. What happens to him?

## Jerusalem is spared

**2 Samuel 24:15-17:**

**So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning until the appointed time, and seventy thousand men of the people from Dan to Beersheba died. 16 When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented from the calamity and said to the angel who destroyed the people, "It is enough! Now relax your hand!" And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. 17 Then David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel who was striking down the people, and said, "Behold, it is I who have sinned, and it is I who have done wrong; but these sheep, what have they done? Please let Your hand be against me and against my father's house."**

Instead of choosing one of the three options, David chooses the Lord. And what does the Lord do? He honors the choice! If David numbered the men from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south to ascertain his military strength, the Lord sends a pestilence, which kills 70,000 men—troops or potential troops—from Dan to Beersheba. By measure of sheer consequences, the ordering of the census represents David's worst sin—worse than his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah, which resulted in far fewer deaths. Out of David's worst comes his best: a repentance in which he confronts himself.

Then, suddenly, without notice, the Lord spares Jerusalem. David preferred to fall into the "hand" of the Lord rather than the "hand" of man; now the Lord stays the "hand" of the angel of death. David's choice to cast himself on the mercy of the Lord is vindicated. The Lord, says, "It is enough."

Why does the Lord stop short of Jerusalem? The narrator, beginning partway through verse 16, tells the back story. David "saw the angel who was striking the people," and he interceded before the Lord. He confesses again, but this time, recognizing that a price must be paid for his sin, asks that he and his family might pay it, inasmuch as he alone is responsible (which isn't entirely true, perhaps unbeknownst to David: the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel prior to David's decision to take a census).

## Better than we deserve

There are, of course, consequences for wrongdoing. We reap what we sow. It only takes a moment's thought to realize that this is the way it has to be—and even the way we want it to be. Who wants to live in a world in which there are no consequences for wrongdoing? Who wants to live in a city that has no police department to deter and punish criminals?

Yes, there are consequences for wrongdoing. But also consider this: those consequences are not as severe as they could be or even, in one sense, should be. Seventy thousand deaths may seem like a lot, but the Lord stayed the hand of the angel. There could have been—and, in one sense, should have been—a lot more deaths.

Sin is far more destructive than we know. One sin was enough to throw the entire creation into chaos—which makes God's mercy quite remarkable. I've met some people who, when you ask them how they're doing, answer, "Better than I deserve." That's true of all of us. In view of our sin against God, we deserve to be banished to hell for all eternity—not when we die but right now.

That we have not been—that the consequences for our sin have been comparatively minor up to this point—is a testament to the mercy of God. The apostle Paul, reflecting on the mercy of God (Romans 9-11), writes: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Romans 11:33) Cast yourself on the mercy of God, take what comes, and give thanks that you’re not getting what you deserve.

David not only interceded before the Lord, he also responded to the Lord.

## David builds an altar

### 2 Samuel 24:18-25:

**So Gad came to David that day and said to him, “Go up, erect an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.” 19 David went up according to the word of Gad, just as the Lord had commanded. 20 Araunah looked down and saw the king and his servants crossing over toward him; and Araunah went out and bowed his face to the ground before the king. 21 Then Araunah said, “Why has my lord the king come to his servant?” And David said, “To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the Lord, that the plague may be held back from the people.” 22 Araunah said to David, “Let my lord the king take and offer up what is good in his sight. Look, the oxen for the burnt offering, the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. 23 Everything, O king, Araunah gives to the king.” And Araunah said to the king, “May the Lord your God accept you.” 24 However, the king said to Araunah, “No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God which cost me nothing.” So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. 25 David built there an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Thus the Lord was moved by prayer for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel.**

David interceded on behalf of the people when he saw the angel striking the people near the threshing floor of Araunah, and now Gad instructs him to build an altar at that spot. Araunah volunteers his possessions so that David can offer sacrifices to the Lord, but David insists on paying Araunah and even purchases the threshing floor. Araunah wishes for the Lord to accept David, and, after David builds an altar and makes his sacrifices, the Lord does precisely that. The Lord responds to David and calls off the plague.

The location of the altar is significant for two reasons.

First, when David brought the ark into Jerusalem, Uzzah took hold of it when it came to a threshing floor. Back then, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and he struck and killed Uzzah. Now, an incident at a threshing floor in Jerusalem does not kindle the Lord’s anger but instead terminates his anger. As David says in Psalm 103:9, the Lord will not “keep his anger forever.” In this case, the Lord’s anger ceases when David intercedes on behalf of the people, builds an altar, and offers sacrifices.

Second, David decreed that the temple be built at this location (1 Chronicles 21:28-22:1). An incident at a threshing floor in Jerusalem kindled the anger of the Lord. Another incident at a threshing floor in Jerusalem terminated his anger. Finally, the temple is built over the second threshing floor so that the people can make ongoing sacrifices to extinguish the Lord’s anger—and satisfy his love also, by the way. This episode, featuring David’s worst sin and his best repentance, sets the scene for the advent of the temple, which will represent the presence of God on earth.

## God accepts you

If God’s anger was kindled against Israel, it has also been “revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18). On the one hand, God has revealed his wrath in response to human sin. On the other hand, God has “put forward” Christ as an atoning sacrifice for human sin (Romans 3:24-25).

David’s burnt offerings and peace offerings, especially inasmuch as they were made at the future site of the temple, foreshadow the Son of David’s sacrifice on the cross. God did not incite Christ to sin, though Christ had been exposed to every temptation to sin; instead, God led him to a cross to put away sin. The writer of Hebrews observes that temple sacrifices are no longer needed because Christ “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26).

Araunah wished for David that the Lord his God would accept him. In view of the sacrifice of Christ, there is no question that those of us who believe in Christ are accepted by the Lord our God. As the writer of Hebrews says, “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all” (Hebrews 7:27).

God, staying the hand of the angel, said, “It is enough.” Christ, dying for the sins of the world, said, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

C.S. Lewis writes of God’s acceptance of us in his magisterial essay, *The Weight of Glory*:

*It is written that we shall “stand before” Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God . . . to be a real ingredient in the Divine happiness . . . to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is. (C.S. Lewis 34.)*

Do you realize that? If you believe in Christ, you are a “real ingredient” in God’s happiness.

What then remains for us? If David refused to offer burnt sacrifices to God that cost him nothing, the apostle Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1). In view of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf, we offer a sacrifice to God that costs us everything—that is, our whole lives. We say to God, “Here I am. All of me. Do with me what you will.”

## Facing the truth

What holds us back from confronting ourselves? Is it not fear of not measuring up, fear of feeling “less than,” fear of feeling inferior? But what if such fears don’t matter? The Gospel, which features God’s acceptance of us based on the sacrifice of Christ, insists that they don’t matter. If you believe in Christ, God accepts you. It’s as simple as that. Believe it. Believe that God accepts you—at your best, at your worst.

The assurance of God’s acceptance of us gives us the courage to confront ourselves, to be honest with ourselves and with God, and to emerge from the self-inflated fantasy world that we’ve constructed for ourselves to protect ourselves from feelings of inferiority. The Gospel empowers us to face the truth, even the truth about ourselves, and, as the Son of David says, “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

The Gospel empowers us to confront ourselves without lapsing into self-condemnation, which is self-pity: feeling sorry for yourself because you don’t measure up. Self-condemnation is just a way of letting yourself off the hook, because if you deem yourself inferior, why even try? Why not just wallow in self-pity? The Gospel will not allow it, for as Paul observes, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

All those years of fearing feelings of inferiority? It is enough. All those years of refusing to confront yourself because of those feelings, or using those feelings to justify self-pity? It is finished. God says so. Christ says so.

Confront yourself because God accepts you. What do you have to lose but your fears?

## Endnotes

- Brooks, David. *The Road to Character*. New York: Random House, 2012.
- Lewis, C.S.. *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.