

*The Covenant Pulpit*



**2 Samuel 24:10-25**

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The mid-1600s produced one of the darkest hours in British history. The country had just emerged from a bloody civil war. King Charles I had been overthrown and beheaded by the British Parliament. For the first time in more than a thousand years, no monarch sat on the throne of England. In the months that followed, the country teetered on the edge of anarchy, the economy was in shambles, and foreign powers were plotting to invade the island nation. The British treasury was bankrupt, and the army was threatening to mutiny if its soldiers weren't paid.

During this tumultuous time, a desperate British Parliament turned to the Puritan general, Oliver Cromwell. By making him High Lord Protector of England, he was given dictatorial power to restore order and save the nation. His first priority was to find silver and gold that could be minted into coins. It was a futile effort. The country was virtually penniless.

Finally, Oliver Cromwell ordered his agents to search the churches and cathedrals. A few days later they reported back,

"The only silver we could find is in the statues of the saints that are in the corners of the cathedrals."

The High Lord Protector of England gruffly replied,

"Good! It's about time that the saints did something useful for their country. Let's cart them out of the sanctuaries, melt them down, and put them back into circulation."

In those few words, Oliver Cromwell captures the very essence of *real* worship. God has placed us in this world to do something useful. We are not called to be silver saints, highly polished and frequently dusted, crammed into corners of cathedrals. We are no good to anyone if we are plaster people, cloaked in thin layers of untarnished silver and topped with a metallic halo. The world is in need of saints who are *real* people. We don't come to church to be polished, but to be melted down by the fire of the Holy Spirit in authentic and passionate worship. Then we are to be circulated out there in the mainstream and marketplace of *real* humanity.

What is worship? It is to be melted down and put back into circulation. In Romans 12:1, St. Paul defined *real* worship this way: "...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God..." The ancient Jews sang a song: "We bring a *sacrifice* of praise into the house of the Lord." (Jeremiah 33:11). To worship is to be melted down. At its heart, worship is all about sacrifice.

The very word *worship* comes from an old English word *worth-ship*. That which is of greatest *worth* to us is that which we worship. That which ignites our passion, and consumes us most, is our god. Whatever you price we are willing to pay, or sacrifice we are willing to give, is your worship. As a Christian, how do you measure your worship of God? In short, how much is he worth to you? Oswald Chambers described *real* worship as “our utmost for his highest.” King David put it this way in 2 Samuel 24:24: “I will not sacrifice to God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.” This is what he says about igniting our spiritual passion:

**Worship is worth too much  
to allow others to pay the price.**

King David has committed a sin that has unleashed the Angel of Death on Israel. Seventy thousand Israelites. But God has been merciful, and stopped the plague. Now David goes up to the top of a little mountain outside the old city to make a sacrifice of praise to God for his grace. .

On that mountaintop is a thriving agribusiness, a threshing floor owned by a man named Araunah. Verse 18 says that Araunah is a Jebusite. He is a descendant of the ancient Canaanites who first built Jerusalem. He does not worship the God of David, nor does he belong to God’s family. But when David offers to buy his Araunah’s property so that he can build an altar, this nonbeliever insists on donating it to the king in verse 22:

“Let my Lord the king take whatever pleases him and offer it up. Here are oxen for the burnt offering and here are threshing sledges and ox yokes for the wood. Araunah gives all this to the king.”

Araunah is making an astounding sacrifice. This land has probably been in his family for generations. Yet he is willing to dismantle his family business: his property for an altar, his oxen for the sacrifice, and the wooden tools of his trade to fuel the fire. This passionate pagan holds nothing back. He understands, better than most Christians, the heart of worship: it is worth everything. In the end, it will consume everything. David also understands this principle. That’s why he can’t allow Araunah to pay the cost. He replies in verse 24, “I will not sacrifice to God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.”

Araunah can’t pay for your worship. Neither can anyone else. You can’t let the offering plate pass by while others dig deep to pay the costs of the ministries of your church. You can’t passively float through worship while those around you sing their hearts out. You can’t live vicariously off your

wife's spirituality, your parent's faith, your pastor's Bible study, or the evangelistic efforts of missionaries somewhere else. It's not right to enjoy the privileges of a church without getting involved in the ministries that make it go, or wait for someone else to share the gospel with your nonbelieving friends. Not everyone can give the same amount, but everyone can make *equal* sacrifice. Every believer can be melted down and put back into circulation for God's glory. What's great worship worth?

**1. Great worship costs honesty.** Sorrow over sin started this journey to the top of that mountaintop. Verse 10 captures the cry of his wounded heart:

"David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and said to the Lord, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing.'"

The king was at the end of his life. His kingdom was secure and he was at the zenith of power and prosperity. For some reason he decided to take a census of his nation to find out how many fighting men were available. The Bible never tells us why David's census was wrong. We only know that 1 Chronicles 21:1 says, "Satan rose up...to incite David to take a census of Israel." In 1 Chronicles 21:3, David's military commander, Joab protests the census as evil. Afterwards, according to verse 10, "David was conscience-stricken..." In verse 10 he cries out, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done." He desperately begs God to remove his guilt. This census so offended God that he unleashed a death angel who has already killed 70,000 people. Even after David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and murdered her husband in the cover-up, God didn't respond with this kind of wrath. What drove David to take this census? We will never know. We only know that it brought on the worst consequences David ever experienced. It is this horror that sets the backdrop to his worship.

I wish that that the good times most often drove us to worship. It would be so much better to enter God's gates with thanksgiving, and come into his courts with praise. But prosperity more often leads to pride than to worship. There are two great sins in David's life. The first was his adulterous affair that took place when he was relaxing at home while his armies were off fighting. The second is this census which took place while he was at the zenith of his power. Prosperity often dulls our passion for the Lord. Is there any greater threat than self-sufficiency and complacency? It is no wonder that David prayed in Psalm 139:23&24, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious heart; See if there is in offensive way in

me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt...”

On the surface of things, a census is a prudent act on the part of wise kings. After all, shouldn't we have a handle on our available resources? But there was a sinister motive hidden in the secret places of David's heart. Was it pride, or a lack of faith, or a dependence on human strength? We can only speculate. We can hardly understand our own motives, much less those of other people. But David allowed the darkest parts of his heart be revealed by God. Most of us can't handle the truth about ourselves. But David was a man after God's heart. And you cannot find his heart until you know your own. Passionate worship begins with a self-examination that melts us down.

**2. Great worship abandons itself to God.** After the census, God sends a prophet to David with three choices in verse 13: three years of famine; three months of being pursued by his enemies, or three days of plague. How would you like to choose between these? David replies in verse 14, “I am in deep distress. Let me fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men.” David has no good options. God's discipline is never pleasant. No wonder he is in such distress.

David could have opted for the second choice: being pursued by his enemies. He might have figured that he could outwit them. After all, he was a brilliant military strategist. He had spent most of his adult life as a fugitive, outsmarting enemies who pursued him. Sometimes, when we are trapped in our own sin and headed for a crash, we try to manipulate the situation for a soft landing. We lay awake at night thinking of ways to avoid detection or strategizing on how to avoid the consequences. Sometimes we are even clever enough to wiggle off the hook. Years before, David had tried to manage the consequences of his adulterous affair with an artful cover-up. But his world unraveled anyway. You might fool some of the people some of the time, but God will never be outfoxed. This time, David won't even play the game. He cries out in verse 14, “Let me fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great...” Don't spend your life trying to fix things with people. In the end most folks are not very merciful. But God's mercy is great. What is your worship worth? It is worth abandoning all trust in your own abilities to outfox others, or manipulate life for a soft landing, and putting yourself in God's hands even if you are shattered for a greater good.

**3. Great worship meets at the place of grace.** God sends his judgment. You can read about it verses 15-18. On the surface it looks like a plague. But verse 16 says that it is a destroying angel. When the angel stretches forth his

hand, people die. If you compare verses 5-8 to verse fifteen, you will receive an amazing insight: the angel follows the same route taken by David's men when they took the census. Could it be that the death angel is killing the very fighting men that had been counted by David's census takers? Is it possible that David had taken the census to find security, or take pride, in the number of soldiers he had at his disposal? And now God is stripping away the size of David's army. God never wants us to put our trust in our size, our strength, our material resources, our cleverness, our health, our goodness, or our spirituality. So he strips away our pseudo-security so that we will flee to him for his greater security. Isn't God's grace amazing?

Now the story turns. Verse sixteen says that the angel is now outside Jerusalem. He is at the threshing floor of Araunah. He has barely begun his journey of death across Israel. It is at this threshing floor that God cries out to his destroying angel, "Enough! Withdraw your hand!" Two times we see the word "grief" in this passage. In verse 14 we see David's grief that leads to repentance. In verse 16 we see God's grief that leads to mercy. Our repentance always leads to God's grace.

One day this very threshing floor will become the site on which the temple is built. On this very spot countless millions of blood sacrifices for sin will be made to God. On this spot where the death angel is stops, the priests of Israel will cry out for God's mercy on sinners. And, if you look down from this threshing floor to a smaller hill, you will see a pile of rock that looks strangely like a skull. Some thousand years later the Only Begotten Son of God will meet the Angel of Death. He will feel the full wrath of God's judgment. There, the holiness of God's justice will intersect with the holiness of his mercy, and grace will triumph. What is your worship worth? It is worth coming to the Cross and abandoning all self-sufficiency. You will never again count how many fighting men you have at your disposal, or hold on to them, for you will find your salvation wholly in the grace of God!

#### **4. Great worship is dictated by the One who is worshipped.**

Remember grace precedes worship. It began with God revealing the deceitfulness of sin. There can be no true worship without self-awareness. The next step was repentance. David was grief-stricken. Then followed the consequences of David's sin. After that God's mercy and grace stopped the death angel. Now grace leads to sacrificial worship. We hold nothing good back from God because he held nothing good back from us. We give him everything of worth to us because we were worth everything to him, even the sacrifice of his Only Begotten Son. But that grace doesn't allow us to

worship him anyway we please. God sends a prophet who is very specific in how the Lord wants to be worshipped. Look at verses 18&19:

“On that day God went to David and said to him, ‘Go up and build an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.’ So David went up, as the Lord had commanded through Gad.”

1 John 5:3 says, “If we love God we will obey his commandments.” If we are passionate about him, we will worship on *his* terms, not ours. Over the years I heard so many people say, “I’ll worship God in my own way.” But God sends prophets to reveal to us how he wants to be worshipped. The Scriptures are a very clear worship manual. Too many postmodern folks are consumers, sniffing and picking like finicky eaters at a buffet of worship experiences. We all have our style preferences. Too often we evaluate our hour of worship like a Hollywood movie critic rates a movie. But God is the only critic that matters. Worship is first of all for him. He is very particular with David: a specific mountain outside Jerusalem, a specific place on that mountain, and a specific kind of sacrifice, offered a specific way. How much is your worship worth? I hope it is in doing it exactly the way that gives him pleasure? Here’s the question: Are you sure that your worship is pleasing to him? Remember, for David it began by honestly evaluating his heart.

**5. Great worship personally sacrifices.** We have already seen the great heart of that pagan, Araunah. He is willing to give everything away: his land, his business, his oxen, and the tools of his trade to fuel the fire. For a moment, David is home free. But that deal won’t wash. Again, verse 24: “No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.”

David cuts right to the heart of worship with two universal principles: 1) Worship must be *personal*. Nobody else can do it for you. 2) It must be *sacrificial*. Its worth is measured in the cost paid. That threshing floor cost David one-and-a-half pounds of silver. I Chronicles 21:15 says that he bought the whole mountaintop for 15 pounds of pure gold. Look at the action verbs in verse twenty-five: “David *built* an altar...and *sacrificed* offerings.” He was a king. He could have ordered someone else to do the labor, but worship is not a spectator sport. Consumers go away as empty as they came. You will never get more out of anything than you personally invest in it. Always the question comes back to this: What is the worth of your worship? No one else can pay that price for you.

It's sacrificial and personal worship that grabs the heart of God. Verse 25 ends with these words: "Then the Lord answered prayer on behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped." I believe that there is a plague on our land. We desperate for solutions to the moral, social, civil, and economic plagues that threaten the very future of America and the world. I wonder the answer is painfully simple: if we will only get honest with ourselves, repent of our passionless lives, and return to him with authentic worship that holds nothing back, is it possible that he will stop the plagues? God's promises in 2 Chronicles 7:14 still hold true today: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land. Americas healing is not found in the White House, the State House, the Court House, the School House, or the Movie House. It will be found in the Church house when the saints are melted down and put back into circulation.

**6. At the point of great worship God builds a great temple.** When David comes to this mountaintop there is only a pagan's threshing floor; a place of commerce where farmers bring their wheat to have it converted to grain. People barter, and money exchanges hands. Men sweat and curse. Oxen snort and the smell of dung fills the air. It is hardly a holy place. Yet, after David offers his sacrifices at this place, we read in I Chronicles 22:1, "Then David said, 'The house of the Lord is to be here...'" Later the Great Temple will stand on this very site. But it's important that you see the sequence. The temple does not produce the worship. The worship produces the temple. Worship transforms a threshing floor to a holy place. Worship transforms you, and it transforms every place you are, into a temple: whether it is in a bathroom, changing a baby's diapers while softly singing a hymn; or in a classroom where you whisper a prayer before a test; or a park bench where you meditate on the goodness of God; or in a hospital bed where you show the grace of God to a nurse whose attending you; or in a business deal where you sacrifice a profit by doing the right thing; or in performing an act of mercy to someone in desperate need. Who would have imagined that a threshing floor would become a temple? Amazing things happen in saints are melted down and put back into circulation.