

The Covenant Pulpit



PURSUIING THE HEART OF GOD
"David, a man after God's Heart"

"THE SACRIFICIAL HEART"

2 Samuel 24

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The pilots were in a hurry to take off on that warm Sunday evening. If they didn't clear the runway quickly, they wouldn't beat the noise curfew at their destination in Phoenix.

So the Northwest Airlines McDonnell Douglas MD-82 rumbled down the runway in spite of the fact that the pilots failed to go through their taxi checklist. Had they taken the time, they might have discovered that they didn't have electrical power to the aircraft takeoff warning system. They also would have known that the slats and flaps of their airliner were not extended enough.

Instead, as Flight 255 lifted off from the runway in Detroit, the jet began to rock laterally. It struck a light pole, severing eighteen feet off its left wing and igniting stored fuel. The right wing was seared off as it ripped through an Avis car rental building. Rolling crazily out of control, the jetliner careened through traffic, killing motorists on the freeway and slamming into a railroad overpass off Interstate-94. It then exploded into a fireball, scattering its charred remains everywhere.

It was one of the worst tragedies in Airline history. One hundred and fifty-four passengers and crewmembers perished, along with two motorists on the highway. Among the dead were 29 people under the age of twenty, including a four-month-old baby. Only a handful of airline crashes have killed more children, and wiped out more entire families, than Flight 255.

The Detroit medical examiner was one of the first people to arrive on the scene after the fiery crash. He shook his head and declared it was impossible that anyone could have survived. As rescuers combed through the burned corpses in the eerie darkness, it would seem that he was right. Then someone heard a child's faint whimper.

Miraculously, four-year-old Cecilia Cichan was huddled under the charred body of her mother next to the remains of her father and six-year-old brother. Cecilia was critically injured, and bearing scars that she will carry for the rest of her life, but she was alive!

After the rescuers pulled little Cecilia from the wreckage, the medical examiner closely studied the positions of the bodies. He concluded that, in the seconds that the doomed airliner hurtled toward impact, Cecilia's mother somehow managed to wrap herself around her little girl. Her body not only cushioned the impact, but also took the full fury of the fireball that roared through the disintegrating cabin.

Her mother's body became a shield of salvation for Cecilia that night.

When I think of Cecilia's mother, I recall King David's description of our God in Psalm 28:7: "The LORD is my strength and my shield..."

More than that, I think of the words of our Savior as he stood on a hill overlooking Jerusalem a few days before his crucifixion:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” —Matthew 23:37

A mother’s act of love on Flight 255 gives us a glimpse of what Jesus did on the cross. Our world careens out of control like that Northwest Flight. Like those pilots, we have violated the rules. The world is on a collision course with destiny and the flames of hell are racing toward us like a ferocious firestorm. But Jesus wrapped himself around his chicks. On the cross he took the full fireball of hell. In a mystery we will never understand, an eternity of hell was distilled into six hours.

Christ’s body has become our shield. Like little Cecilia we emerge wounded and scarred from the collisions of life, but we are saved from eternal death, because our Lord wrapped his body around ours.

In this final episode in King David’s pursuit of God’s heart, it is fitting that we also come to the Lord’s Table. In it we see and celebrate the body of our Lord, and remember how it wrapped itself around us and absorbed the full fire of hell. From David, we learn the final and most important principle for those who want to seize the heart of God:

**The Heart of God is worth too much
to allow others to pay the price.**

At the heart of worship is sacrifice. Romans 12:1 describes worship this way: “...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God...” The ancient Jews sang a song as they entered the temple: “We bring a *sacrifice* of praise into the house of the Lord.” (Jeremiah 33:11). There can be no worship without sacrifice. The very word *worship* comes from an old English word: worth-ship. That which is of greatest worth to us always receives our best. That which ignites our passion, and consumes us most, is our god. King David put it this way in 2 Samuel 24:24: “I will not sacrifice to God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.”

Little Cecilia’s mother took the full heat of the fire to protect the one she loved. She had the heart of God that Jesus exposed on the cross. Mahatma Gandhi refused to follow Jesus because he never met a Christian who acted like Christ. But he understood the glory of Jesus’ sacrificial death when he wrote,

“A man who was completely innocent offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act.”

Let's now go to 1 Samuel 24. David committed a sin that unleashed the Angel of Death on Israel, resulting in the death of seventy thousand Jews. But a merciful God has stopped the plague. Now David goes up to a mountain outside the old city to make a sacrifice of praise.

On that mountaintop is a thriving agribusiness; a threshing floor that is owned by a man named Araunah. Verse eighteen says that he is a Jebusite, one of the descendants of the ancient Canaanites who first built Jerusalem. He does not worship the God of David, but when the king offers to buy Araunah's property so that he could build an altar, this unbeliever insists on donating it:

"Let my Lord the king take whatever pleases him and offer it up. Here are oxen for your burnt offering and here are threshing sledges and ox yokes for the wood. Araunah gives all this to the king."
—2 Samuel 24:22

Araunah makes an amazing sacrifice. The land has been in his family for generations. Yet he is willing to dismantle his family business: property for an altar; oxen for a sacrifice; and the tools of his trade to fuel the fire. This passionate pagan holds nothing back. He understands the heart of worship better than most Christians. He knows that real worship consumes everything. David also understands this principle. That's why he won't let Araunah 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 ministry. 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. Worship will never allow others to make the sacrifices we must make. What is it worth?

1. THE PURSUIT OF GOD'S HEART DEMANDS HONESTY

Sorrow over sin started this journey to the top of this mountain outside the old city. Verse ten 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 to 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 this census was wrong. We only know that 1 Chronicles 21:1 says, "Satan rose up...to incite David to take

a census of Israel. Afterwards, 2 Samuel 24:10 records that "David was conscience-stricken..." He cries out, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done." This census so offends God that he unleashes a death angel who kills 70,000 people in a plague. Even after David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and murdered her husband in the cover-up, God didn't respond with such severity!

The sin must have been in David's motive for doing it. God knows the secret deceit of our heart. We do know that this census unleashed the worst consequences David ever experienced and led to this worship.

I wish that the good times drove us to worship. It would be so much better to enter his gates with thanksgiving than to be driven there by desperation. But prosperity more often leads to pride than worship. There were two great sins in David's life. The first was the adulterous affair when he was relaxing at home while his men were off fighting his battles. The second was a census taken at the zenith of his power. Self-sufficiency and complacency dull our passion for God and fuel deceit.

Maybe that's why David prayed in Psalm 139:23&24, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts; See if there is an offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting." It is so easy to deceive ourselves. On the surface, a census is a prudent act by a wise king. But there was a sinister motive in David's heart. Was it pride, or a lack of faith, or a dependence on the size of his army? We can only speculate. We can hardly understand our own motives, much less David's. But David allowed the darkest part of his heart to be exposed. Most of us don't want to know the truth about ourselves. But David was a man after God's heart. This is an inviolate truth: you cannot know God's heart until you know yours. The first sacrifice of worship is to **allow your heart to be cut open and exposed in all of its raw ugliness.**

2. THE PURSUIT ABANDONS ITSELF TO GOD'S HEART

After the census, God sends a prophet to David with three choices in verse thirteen: three years of famine; three months of being pursued by his enemies; or three days of plague. How would you like to choose from that buffet table of judgments? David replies in verse fourteen, "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 distress!

David could have opted for the second choice: being pursued by his enemies. He had spent most of his adult life as a fugitive, outsmarting enemies who pursued him. Sometime we feel like we are on Flight 255. Our sins and stupidities have us in freefall. We lay awake at night thinking of the ways we can minimize the consequences while angling for a soft landing. Years before, David tried to wiggle off the hook when

he discovered Bathsheba was pregnant. But David found out that you can fool some of the people some of the time, but God is never outfoxed. So he cries out in verse fourteen, "Let me fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great..." Don't waste your life trying to fix things with people. Most folks aren't very merciful anyway. But God's mercy is great. The second sacrifice of worship is to **abandon yourself to God's heart even if it means he will shatter your heart to make it his.**

3. GOD'S HEART IS FOUND AT THE PLACE OF GRACE

If David is looking for mercy, this is a severe mercy. You can read about it in verses 15-18. On the surface it looks like a plague, but verse sixteen says that it is a "destroying angel." If you compare verses 5-8 to verse 15, you get 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 soldiers he had at his disposal? Now God is stripping away those same men. God never wants us to put our trust in our size, our strength, our resources, our health, our morality, or our spirituality. So he strips away our pseudo-securities so that we will flee to him for greater security. Isn't God's grace amazing?

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

One day this very threshing floor will become the site of the temple. On this very spot countless millions of blood sacrifices for sin will be made to God. On this spot, where God stops the death angel, priests will cry out for God's mercy on sinners. If you look beyond this threshing floor you will see a rock pile below. It looks strangely like a skull. Some thousand years later the Only Begotten Son of God will meet the Angel of Death, and feel the full wrath of God's judgment. There the holiness of God's justice will collide with the holiness of his mercy, and grace will triumph. The third sacrifice of worship is to **abandon all hope in the resources at your disposal and rest wholly in God's grace.**

4. WORSHIP MEETS THE DESIRES OF THE ONE WORSHIPPED

Remember, grace precedes worship. It begins with God revealing the deceitfulness of sin. The next step is repentance. David was grief-stricken. Then the natural consequences followed. True worship is willing to accept God's discipline. 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 holds nothing good back from us. We give him everything of worth because he gave everything of worth to us when he gave his Son. But this grace doesn't allow us to worship him as we please, or to please ourselves. God is very specific in how he wants to be worshipped:

“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 commanded through Gad.” —2 Samuel 24:18&19

If we are passionately in love with God, we will worship him on his terms and not ours. Too many of us want to worship God in the way that pleases us most. Traditionalists turn traditions into idols. The trendy are slaves to experiencing the latest fads in worship. Most folks come to church as consumers. Too often we evaluate our experience the way a movie critic rates a Hollywood film. But God is the only critic that matters. Pleasing him, not ourselves, is the point of worship. God is very specific with David: a specific mountain outside the old city; a specific place on that mountain; and a specific sacrifice offered in a specific way. Our Bible is a worship guide regulating exactly how our God wants to be worshipped. The fourth sacrifice of worship is to **leave your preferences at the door and give yourself to pleasing God alone.**

5. GREAT WORSHIP IS EXTRAVAGANTLY LAVISH

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 fires of sacrifice. For a moment, David is home free. But that deal won't wash. Again, verse twenty-four: “No, I insist on paying 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**. No one 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. 1 Chronicles 21:15 says that he bought the whole mountaintop for fifteen pounds of pure gold, a king's ransom in those days. Look at the action verbs in verse twenty-five: “David *built* an altar...and *sacrificed* offerings. He was the 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 come. You will never get more out of anything than what you invest in it. Always the question comes back: What is the worth of your worship?

God is not asking us to do anything he didn't do. He could have let the blood of lambs, bulls, and goats suffice for the sacrifice of our sins. How many angels would have volunteered to come to earth and die on a cross? Or he could have demanded that we pay the price for our sins.

But he **personally** came and died for us. He could have paid a small price for our salvation. After all, he sets the rules. But he gave the greatest **sacrifice** of all. He is not asking anything from us that he hasn't already done for us. In fact, it is a whole lot less. Sacrifice is at the heart of God's heart and the fifth sacrifice of your worship will be to **give extravagantly of your heart and all its treasures to him.**

6. AT THE PLACE OF WORSHIP GOD BUILDS A 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 sacrifice at this place, we read in 1 Chronicles 22:1, "Then David said, 'The house of the LORD is to be here...'"

Later the Great Temple will stand on this 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 holy temple: whether you are in a bathroom changing your baby's diaper while softly singing a hymn; or in a classroom where you whisper a prayer before a test; or on a park bench where you meditate on God's Word; or from a hospital bed when you share the gospel with your nurse; or in a business deal where you overcome the temptation to compromise your integrity. Who would have imagined that a threshing floor would become a temple? The sixth sacrifice of a heart after God is to **make every moment of your life an act of worship pleasing to him.**

When we have seen the sacrifice of God on our behalf, we cannot help but pay it forward to God and others. Cecilia Cichan was only four years old when Flight 255 crashed. She can't remember what happened that day. But she knows that her mother wrapped herself around her to shield her from the flames. Cecilia graduated from the University of Alabama a few years ago with a degree in psychology. She is now a committed Christian helping others who are struggling with loss and pain. She knows what it was like to lose her whole family. She wears her scars as proudly as a soldier wears medals of valor. Above all, she gives her life to others because her mother gave her life for her. It's what everyone with the heart of God does.

Today, we will commune with the body of Christ that wrapped itself around us and took the full fury of hell so that we might enjoy the great joy of heaven. How can we not wrap ourselves around this Lord, and pay it forward in lives befitting those who have seized the heart of God?