

Exodus 30:11–16 and 38:25-28

Introduction

This morning, we come to a part of holy Scripture that can seem very, very strange to us, and leave us asking lots of questions. But behind any questions we may have, the ultimate question is always this: Are we always reading God’s Word with an attitude of humble submission and reverence? No matter how strange any part of Scripture may seem to us, do we read it always *by faith, believing* that this *is* the Word of God?

After all the instructions about the tabernacle and its furniture and its priesthood, we come, now, to a section that might at first seem to have nothing to do with any of these things – a section on counting and taxing the people of Israel. After this section, we’ll return to the furniture of the tabernacle for the last time (the bronze water basin). So another question we might have this morning is why this section is placed here – right *after* the altar of incense, and before we come to the bronze basin. We begin in verse eleven:

I. Exodus 30:11–12 — The LORD said to Moses, “When you lift up the head of the people of Israel to be counted [*paqad*], then each shall give a ransom for his life to the LORD when you count [*paqad*] them, that there be no plague among them when you count [*paqad*] them.”

So the topic here is obviously **counting** of the people of *Israel* (3x’s). Simple enough. The expression, “When you lift up the head of the people of Israel to be counted,” could be similar to the expression, “fifty head of cattle.” The number of heads equals the number of cattle, and the same is obviously true for people. So far, so good.

“When you lift up the head of the people of Israel to be counted, **then each shall give a ransom for his life to the LORD** when you count them, **that there be no plague among them** when you count them.” Now is when we start to feel confused. The point, here, is that *any* counting of the people of Israel is *always* a very dangerous business. Indeed, just to be counted is to risk God’s judgment in the form of a plague that brings death. (cf. Exod. 12:13; Num. 16:46-50; Josh. 22:17 & Num. 25:6-9)

So right away I’m thinking: Isn’t it obvious? Just never, ever count the people! The problem is that when it comes to running a nation, “counting” can be a very necessary thing. In our day, people might be counted for purposes of taxing, or for purposes of distributing government grants and financial aid. Certainly in the life of Israel, counting would have been necessary for organizing any army to fight the Lord’s battles. We know of two times, at least, when the Lord Himself actually commanded Moses to count the people!

➤ Numbers 1:1–2 (cf. Num. 26:1-4) — The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai... saying, “Lift up the head of all the congregation of the people of Israel to be counted, by clans, by fathers’ houses, according to the number of names, every male, head by head.

Now, of course, God *has* provided a solution to the problem here, though we still may not be sure *why* it’s a problem. The solution is the payment of a ransom to God: “Each shall give a

ransom for his life to the Lord.” So let’s sum up: Number one: Counting is dangerous. It risks the judgment of God in a plague of death. Number two: Counting is necessary and even required by God. Number three: Whenever the people are counted, they must give *to the Lord* a ransom for their lives, that there might not be any plague among them. We go on to read in verse thirteen:

II. Exodus 30:13 — Each one who crosses over to be counted [*paqad*] shall give this: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as an offering to the LORD.

We might picture a secretary or a recorder sitting at a table outdoors. In front of the table are all those waiting to be counted. Behind the table are all those who have already “crossed over” to the other side and been counted. That’s probably the imagery behind the phrase, “Each one who crosses over...”

But the emphasis, here, seems to be on the free choice that each person is making. When it comes to being counted, there’s never any coercion – no one is being “forced.” The only people to be counted are those who freely choose to “cross over.” *These* are the people who *must* give an offering *to the Lord* as a ransom for their lives; and the amount of that ransom is to be exactly half a shekel of silver. That’s not an insignificant amount of money, but neither is it an exceedingly burdensome amount of money. It’s just the *prescribed, necessary* amount of money for the ransoming of your life *if* you choose to cross over and be counted. We go on to read in verse fourteen:

III. Exodus 30:14 — Everyone who crosses over to be counted [*paqad*], from twenty years old and upward, shall give the LORD’s offering.

It seems like with each new bit of information, the main point is repeated again, and again, and again: “Everyone who crosses over to be counted... shall give the Lord’s offering.” The new bit of information here is that all those who are counted must be at least twenty years old. In Exodus 38, we find the results of the first census taken in Israel:

- **Exodus 38:25–26** — The silver from those of the congregation who were recorded was a hundred talents and 1,775 shekels, by the shekel of the sanctuary: a beka a head (that is, half a shekel, by the shekel of the sanctuary), for everyone who was listed in the records, **from twenty years old and upward, for 603,550 men.**

When we compare the “twenty-years-old and up” rule and the total number of those who were counted (603,550) with the census that God commands in Numbers chapter one, we see that the census in Numbers and the census in Exodus are the same. This is what we read in Numbers chapter one:

- **Numbers 1:1–3, 45–46** — The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai... saying, “Lift up the head of all the congregation of the people of Israel to be counted... every male, head by head. From twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war, you and Aaron shall list them, company by company... So all those listed of the people of Israel,

by their fathers' houses, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war in Israel— all those listed were 603,550.”

So what we see, now, is that the whole point of this “counting” is registering the people in **the Lord’s army**; the whole point of this “counting” is registering the people to fight **the Lord’s** battles. Now, isn’t it a noble and praiseworthy thing that the men in Israel twenty-years-old and upward would freely choose to cross over and be counted? *Why*, then, should their lives be forfeit as soon as they do? Why, then, should those who cross over be required to pay a ransom as soon as they do, in order that there might be no plague among them? Now we go on to read in verse fifteen:

IV. Exodus 30:15 — The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half shekel, when you give the LORD’s offering to pay the ransom price for your lives.

Now, there are other places where God provides for smaller, less valuable offerings for the poor. (cf. Lev. 5:7, 11; 12:8; 14:21-22, 30-32; 27:8) So right away, we’re curious. Why, in this case, is God so strict about the poor and the rich both paying exactly the same amount – the poor, no less, and the rich, no more? Finally, we come to verse sixteen:

V. Exodus 30:16 — You shall take the ransom money from the people of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the LORD, so as to provide the ransom for your lives.

Four times in the last four verses we’ve seen that the ransom money is to be paid *to the Lord* – as an offering *to the Lord*. Now we see exactly what this means. The ransom money is to be used for the service (or the worship) of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to **remembrance** before the Lord, so as to provide the ransom for their lives.

So there we have all the facts. Now we ask: What do they mean? And what does it matter?

Conclusion

Why should crossing over to be counted be such a dangerous thing? Some people see the danger not so much in being counted, but in the fact that they’re being counted *for military service* – which is always a dangerous thing. They suggest that the pagan parallel might have been a soldier paying a bribe to the gods for safety in battle. But the point here in Exodus *isn’t* the danger of dying in battle, but the danger of dying by a plague from God. In Numbers 31, the people are even counted *after* fighting a battle—*after* the danger of dying in battle was already past—and yet even then they still paid the ransom for their lives, lest they should die by God’s plague. Other people see the danger, once again, not so much in being counted, but in some kind of ritual impurity that was contracted during the process of being counted. But again, this misses the obvious point of Exodus 30. In Exodus 30, it’s the counting, in and of itself, that’s always dangerous – even when that counting is actually **commanded** by God.

Why!?! We ask. Why should crossing over to be counted be such a dangerous thing? The answer is simple: Because God has **said it is**. Our greatest joy is not to be in knowing *why* God says all

that He says, but in knowing *what* He has said so we can always live in humble obedience *by faith*. So our first and most basic response when we read this passage should be this: What a *privilege* it is to know the will of God. What a privilege it is to know what the ransom price is that God has required. Is this the nature of our relationship with God? Is this the nature of our submission to Him and our delight in His word?

But even as we acknowledge the counting to be dangerous simply because God has said it is, I think we can also know the *reason* that God has chosen to make it dangerous. You see, *counting* the *number* of the people of Israel has everything to do with God's covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fact, it could almost seem to *contradict* those promises. Listen to what the Lord said to Abraham:

- Genesis 13:16 — I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that **if one can count [manah]** the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be **counted [manah]**.
- Genesis 15:5 — Look toward heaven, and number [*saphar*] the stars, **if you are able to number [saphar]** them... So shall your offspring be.

And then to Jacob:

- Genesis 32:12 — I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which **cannot be numbered [saphar]** for multitude.

And then about 500 years later, Solomon prays with these words:

- 1 Kings 3:8 — Your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, **too many to be numbered [manah] or counted [saphar]** for multitude.

Remember, there are times when God Himself commands the people to be numbered, and *yet* it does feel like there could be a tension between this numbering of the people and the covenant promise to Abraham of an offspring that *cannot be numbered*.

Right from the very beginning, we see that a numerous, countless offspring for Abraham is only to be understood as the result of God's covenant blessing and promise. (cf. Gen. 1:26-28) In other words, the Israelites must never take the credit for their own fertility and ability to reproduce. Even *this* was the sovereign gift of God. So after promising a countless, numberless offspring to Abraham, Abraham's wife, Sarah, ends up being unable to conceive even one child until the age of 90. (Gen. 11:30; 17:17) Then, with the promise of a countless, numberless offspring having been passed on to Isaac, it's Isaac's wife, Rebekah, who is unable to conceive any offspring for the first twenty years of marriage. (Gen. 25:20, 26) Only in response to Isaac's prayer does the Lord then enable Rebekah to conceive.

- Genesis 25:21 — Isaac **prayed to the LORD** for his wife, because she was barren. And **the LORD granted his prayer**, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

Why does God promise a countless, numberless offspring to Abraham, and then Isaac, and then withhold children from both of them? The answer is so they—and all of their offspring—might be reminded that this promise can only be fulfilled as the gift and blessing of God.

But God knows how prone we are to take the credit to ourselves for the gifts that He has given. This is what explains the barrenness first of Sarah, and then the barrenness of Rebekah. This is also what explains the constant theme throughout the Old Testament of God's ability to "save... by many or by few." (1 Sam. 14:6; cf. 2 Chron. 14:11; Isa. 31:1) When would the Israelites be most tempted to boast in their numbers? Of course, it would be whenever they went into battle and won a great victory. The Lord knows this, and so we read in the famous story of Gideon:

- Judges 7:2, 7 — 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... The LORD said to Gideon, "With the 300 men... I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand."

If Israel was fruitful and numerous, they were never to boast in this as though it was of their own doing, and they were never to think that these numbers were the source of their victories in battle. Instead, they were to interpret their fruitfulness and abundance only and always as the result of God's gracious gift and blessing – the result of God keeping His covenant promises, according to His steadfast love. It might *seem* simple enough, and yet we all know otherwise, don't we?

It's against all this backdrop that I think we can understand why God would choose to make something that's perfectly normal and acceptable in and of itself to be, now, something deadly. The plague that God threatens, here in Exodus, is always associated with death. In Exodus 12, it was the "plague" that killed all the firstborn in Egypt. (Exod. 12:13) In Numbers 16, it was the "plague" that killed 14,700 people in Israel. (Num. 16:46-50) In Numbers 25, it was the "plague" that killed 24,000 in Israel. (Num. 25:6-9; cf. Josh. 22:17) Can you see the irony? Whenever you count people for the army, there's always the tendency to *hope* for big numbers, and then, further, to put one's *trust* in those big numbers. But this is the **Lord's** army, and it is the **Lord** who saves whether by many or by few. So as a safeguard against haughtiness, and pride, and self-reliance, God simply makes all counting of numbers—even the kind that He Himself commands—to result in *smaller* numbers – *unless* the ransom is paid. I believe we see an example of this in 2 Samuel 24:

- 2 Samuel 24:1–4, 10 — The anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number [*manah*] Israel and Judah." So the king said to Joab, the commander of the army, who was with him, "Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number [*paqad*] the people, **that I may know the number [*mispar*] of the people.**" But Joab said to the king, "**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 it, but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?**" But the king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to number [*paqad*] the people of Israel... But David's heart struck him after he had numbered [*saphar*] the people. And 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 done very foolishly.”*

What had David done? I believe he had taken a census of the people for no other reason than to “know” the strength of his numbers. For this reason, my assumption is also that he conveniently overlooked the “ransom price” as this would have been very unpopular among the people (being taxed simply because of the king’s ego). But then, again, the people (who were already guilty of other sins; cf. 2 Sam. 24:1) would also have been responsible because they willingly crossed over to be numbered in the Lord’s army without bothering to pay the ransom for their lives. And so we read in 2 Samuel 24:15:

- 2 Samuel 24:15 — 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.

What should the numbers have mattered to David, when the Lord is powerful to save by many or by few? In contrast to this negative example, we have the positive example of Numbers thirty-one:

- Numbers 31:48–54 — [After returning from battle against the Midianites,] the officers who were over the thousands of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, came near to Moses and said to Moses, “Your servants have **counted** the men of war who are under our command, and there is not a man missing from us. And we have **brought the LORD’s offering**, what each man found, articles of gold, armlets and bracelets, signet rings, earrings, and beads, **to pay the ransom for ourselves** before the LORD.” ... And Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold from the commanders of thousands and of hundreds, and **brought it into the tent of meeting, as a memorial for the people of Israel before the LORD.**

In the midst of this miraculous and overwhelming victory over their enemies, the triumphant warriors are all reminded that after being counted, their *own lives* are now forfeit to the Lord unless they pay the ransom price.

And where does this ransom price go? It goes into the tent of meeting “that it may bring the people of Israel to **remembrance** before the Lord.” We can get a picture of what this “bring[ing]... to remembrance” looked like when we see how the silver from the first census of Israel was used.

- Exodus 38:25–28 — The silver from those of the congregation who were recorded was a hundred talents and 1,775 shekels... The hundred talents of silver were for casting the bases of the sanctuary and the bases of the veil; a hundred bases for the hundred talents, a talent a base. And of the 1,775 shekels he made hooks for the pillars and overlaid their capitals and made fillets for them. **[See Illustration on page 8]**

* In Exodus 30:11-16, the Hebrew word for “number” or “count” is always *paqad*. In the passages where God promises an offspring that cannot be counted or numbered, the Hebrew words are “*manah*” and “*saphar*.” (cf. Gen. 13:16; 15:5; 32:12; 1 Kings 3:8) In 2 Sam. 24:1-4, 10, these three Hebrew words are all brought together in the account of David’s numbering of Israel.

But what does this “bringing to remembrance” actually mean? We read in Exodus 28:

- Exodus 28:12, 29 — You shall set the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of **remembrance** for the sons of Israel. And Aaron shall bear their names **before the LORD** on his two shoulders for **remembrance**... Aaron shall [also] bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to regular **remembrance before the LORD**.

Last week, in our study of the altar of incense, the word “remembrance” was never used, but clearly that was the point of the fragrant aroma rising from the altar – to bring the people of Israel to the remembrance of the Lord through this symbol of their prayers for God’s forgiveness, and salvation, and help. Perhaps this explains, then, why this section on counting and ransom money has been placed here – because it’s yet another reminder that it’s not the Lord who needs anything from Israel, but Israel who is always in need of blessing from the Lord. Whatever their numbers may be, these are only the *result* of His gracious blessing and promise. Therefore, they must never take any credit for their “strength in numbers,” nor should they ever see in this “strength in numbers” any of the reason for any success they may ever experience. The people of Israel truly *needed* a reminder as powerful and as graphic as paying a ransom for their lives, because otherwise this all flies directly in the face of all our natural ways of thinking.

If God ever saves by many, then aren’t we immediately tempted to attribute that salvation to the many – as though God could not just as easily have saved by a few? This is why God so rarely uses the many. If God ever uses the rich and the powerful, then aren’t we immediately tempted to attribute glory and praise to the rich and the powerful – as though God could not just as easily have used the poor and the weak? This is why God so rarely uses the rich and the powerful. I wonder, too, if this is partly the reason for the ransom price being the same for all. To be rich or poor, to be strong or weak, makes *no* difference whatsoever in the eyes of God – the God who is powerful to save and to work by one just as *easily* as by the other.

If God ever uses the talents and abilities that we have, then aren’t we immediately tempted to attribute whatever the results may be to our own talents and abilities – as though God could not just as easily have used someone else, even someone of lesser ability and talent? I was thinking: What if every time I get up to preach a sermon, and especially every time someone said anything positive about that sermon, I was required by God to pay a ransom for my life as a reminder that even my very life, not to mention any of my abilities or talents, is a *gift* from God? How could I, then, ever dare to attribute anything, ever, to myself? How could it ever be possible for me to *delight* in the praise of men? And how could I not see in this payment of a ransom my own constant, desperate need for the blessing of the Lord? Listen to God’s word to us:

- 1 Corinthians 4:7 — Who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?
- Job 38:36 — Who has put wisdom in the inward parts or given understanding to the mind?
- Jeremiah 9:23–24 — Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.”

- 1 Corinthians 1:26–31 — For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

The message of our passage this morning seems to be this: Would you cross over to be counted in the *Lord's* army? That's a noble thing! Then you must pay a ransom for your life lest you die for being counted. This is what Israel *needed* to remind them that the Lord doesn't require the privilege of our numbers and strength, our wealth, our abilities, or our talents; instead, it's entirely our privilege to live for the one who is powerful to save and powerful to work, whether by many *or by few*, by the rich *or the poor*, the strong *or the weak*, the wise *or the simple*, those who are of noble birth or those who are the lowliest and most despised of the world.

On the one hand, may these things teach us all a *true*, and a *real humility*. On the other hand, may we never underestimate what God can do through *us* as we daily cry out for His strength, and enabling – as we always cry out to Him for His blessing.

