

...to fall in the hands of God...

Did you bring your Bible? Remember to always bring yours. Don't forget our slogan: every Christian with a Bible. Every one should have his own copy, eat from his own plate, and drink from his own cup. It is very important to feed ourselves, to instruct ourselves from the words of this Book. Underline the verses that call your attention, that move you, that orient you, that inspire you at any moment, and treasure them forever in your life and heart. Thus you will also find these verses again and be able to share them with others.

Do you know how much a copy of the Holy Scriptures cost prior to Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press? It cost the salary of a worker for an entire year. Calculate the amount. Today for the cost of a sandwich you can buy one, so there is no excuse for not having your own Bible.

I invite you now to consider an interesting and enigmatic passage regarding King David at the end of his reign. As a youth he was a valiant and hardworking shepherd, a brave warrior who with faith and intelligence defeated the giant, a talented artist, an author and singer with a heart conformed to the demands of God. Nevertheless, in his role as a father he was complacent and did not know how to raise his children with a combination of discipline and freedom. Hence he suffered painful consequences in his family. He was a king experienced in war, and his excellent strategies and dependence on the Lord brought him victory after victory. Thus he was able to unite the people and win great victories, stabilizing, developing and successfully projecting the nation under his rule for forty years.

Let's open our Bibles to chapter twenty-one of the first book of Chronicles.

¹*Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.*

²*So David said to Joab and the commanders of the troops, "Go and count the Israelites from Beersheba to Dan. Then report back to me so that I may know how many there are."* ³*But Joab replied, "May the LORD multiply his troops a hundred times over. My lord the king, are they not all my lord's subjects? Why does my lord want to do this? Why should he bring guilt on Israel?"*

What's wrong with taking a census? Why did Joab classify it as sin? What did the old serpent, the devil, try to get David to do?

Searching the Scriptures we find that the first census registered was ordered by God the second year after Israel had left Egypt. Several months had gone by since their arrival at the foot of Mount Sinai where they camped for one year while receiving the commandments, the laws, statutes, and decrees; building the tabernacle, and organizing themselves as a nation until everything was ready to begin the voyage again to the land where they would establish themselves.

On that occasion, God Himself ordered Moses and Aaron to take a census of the entire congregation, family by family, taking into consideration all those twenty years old and above, in order to know those of sufficient age to fight in the wars, besides the same objective explained in the Scriptures when they carried out the second census thirty-eight years later. The result was 603,550 men.

There was nothing wrong with the instructions from God to register His people. Perhaps in order to understand that our Father is personally interested in each one of us, he knows not only our names but also our particular needs, acts and desires.

History tells us that once they were all ready they began the voyage toward the Promised Land. When they arrived, they camped prior to crossing the Jordan River, and from there Moses sent twelve spies, one for each tribe, whose objective it was to pass through the region and observe. At the end of forty days they returned with samples of the abundant fruits of the land: grapes, pomegranates, and figs, but at the same time the majority of them came with discouraging news. They were cowards, terrorized by the city walls, by the giants, by the armies they had seen, and counseled the people in fear that they were not able to cross the Jordan.

Only two men, Joshua and Caleb, gave a different report. Encouraged by faith that God had promised them that land, a hope that for generations had been handed down, they believed the land would be given to them.

We know God's punishment, the divine judgment: one year for each day.

So the people had to be punished for forty years in the desert until all that unbelieving generation died because they rejected the heavenly purpose and plan to go forward with the objective of establishing the nation in that land.

The second census was carried out at the end of those four decades of discipline and the people, led by Joshua, began their entrance into the Promised Land. The first census is recorded in the book of Numbers chapter one and the second in Numbers chapter twenty-six, where in verse fifty-two the reason for this second census is given, which can also clearly explain to us the objective of the first one.

⁵²*The LORD said to Moses,* ⁵³*"The land is to be allotted to them as an inheritance based on the number of names.*

⁵⁴*To a larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one; each is to receive its inheritance according to the number of those listed.*

So the purpose of God in carrying out that census was, now that they were ready to enter the promised territories, to obtain a means for making a just distribution. Those who were more numerous, the tribes that had multiplied most prolifically, received a greater portion of land.

Here we find the principle of equality with respect to the possession of the land, the source of resources for their maintenance and development. God wanted the distribution to be equal according to the number of persons so there would be justice, equality of opportunity, rather than poverty, since inequalities increase when there is a concentration of natural resources in the hands of the few. So this census was designed to orientate them in the distribution of the land.

God gave the order for the first census at the beginning, since his plan was to take possession much sooner, but I repeat, because of their cowardice, disobedience and unbelief, as well as the evil report brought by ten of the twelve spies, they had to postpone the conquest for forty years. Hence it was necessary to update the registry. The fertile territory they scouted was obviously a contrast to the interminable sand, rocks and solitude of the desert.

It is also interesting to observe the results of this second census as reported in verse sixty-four of Numbers twenty-six:

⁶⁴Not one of them was among those counted by Moses and Aaron the priest when they counted the Israelites in the Desert of Sinai.

⁶⁵For the LORD had told those Israelites they would surely die in the desert, and not one of them was left except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.

The numbers were similar with a slight variation: 601,730 to 603,550 – 1820 men fewer. That is to say, the population practically remained constant with a slight decrease, completely renewing itself since in those forty years all the adults who had lived in Egypt died.

Later, the New Testament explains the reason for this situation – the longest funeral march that ever existed. For four decades the people wandered about in the desert sands. In that journey they died, one after the other, until none of them remained alive except for the two young men who had given the positive report, who believed God and argued that if the Creator had promised them that land, then with His power they would obtain it.

The reason for this punishment was to attack the illness that rests in the heart of man, that makes him doubt the promises of God, that keeps him from appropriating them, and causes him to deviate into mistaken paths.

The third census which now concerns us takes place three centuries later, according to what we have read a moment ago. The first two were ordered by God. This one was the arbitrary decision of King David who knew the Scriptures since he had at hand the Pentateuch where the details of the events are recorded. He was not ignorant of the transcendent purpose of this census. He took the personal, premeditated and reckless initiative to order this census through the ill-fated inspiration of Satan.

How can God's adversary influence our mind? How can he affect our reasoning? How can he manage to interfere in our heart and cause us to make wrong decisions? What does he do to lead us to mistaken conclusions?

The man especially selected to govern the nation was incited by the wicked one. He misread the former situations regarding the causes and motives behind the census. Some theologian think it was arrogance, personal pride, in order to gloat over the greatness that the nation had achieved under his command, how extensive were the tribes and the capability of his people, the prosperity achieved in the almost forty years of his government.

Others say that it might have been because of his desire to expand, that he wanted to calculate the potential force of his army in order to conquer other territories, to dominate other regions, or perhaps to control and extort tribute from the people, and hence he wanted to know the amount of resources he could annex for the fiscal coffers of the monarchy or for his own personal benefit.

Perhaps it was a mixture of all the above, but one thing is clear: his own army general, his close and loyal friend, Joab, when he received the order, immediately realized that it was not the right thing, as we read in verse three:

³*But Joab replied, "May the LORD multiply his troops a hundred times over.*

If you want to know how many there are, may the Lord add a hundred times as many as there are already, as he has developed them and multiplied them. Joab had clear discernment that this order of the king was contrary to God's purposes, but David did not listen to his counsel and, the Scripture explains, the king's blindness prevailed:

⁴*The king's word, however, overruled Joab*

So, submissively, he went out to complete his task. It took Joab about nine months to go from city to city, in collaboration with the army, in order to number the people.

⁵*Joab reported the number of the fighting men to David: In all Israel there were one million one hundred thousand men who could handle a sword, including four hundred and seventy thousand in Judah.*

⁶*But Joab did not include Levi and Benjamin in the numbering, because the king's command was repulsive to him.*

The Levites, who attended to the sacred things, lived from the tithes, so the priestly tribe was not counted as they did not pay tribute. As we have already mentioned, some think that the reason for the census was to collect more taxes from the people or have better fiscal control.

This could also explain why the number that appears in 2 Samuel 24, which is a parallel passage, does not coincide since the entire congregation was not counted, including the small tribe of Benjamin. But, having explained the possible motives that led to ordering the census, I would like to highlight the following.

⁷*This command was also evil in the sight of God; so he punished Israel.*

⁸*Then David said to God, "I have sinned greatly by doing this.*

It took David more than nine months to understand his crime, his transgression, his sin, and recognize his arrogance and miserable intentions, when the results of the census were brought to him.

*Now, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant.
I have done a very foolish thing."*

In spite of his extreme mistake, of the gravity of his decision, of the public repercussion of his sin, he recognized his spiritual carelessness in letting the influence of God's enemy take control of his life. Nevertheless, and this is the exemplary thing, he knew how to recognize his error. The light of the Spirit still illuminated his inner being. He feared God, was capable of admitting his error and his ungodly behavior, and of identifying his foolishness.

⁹*The LORD said to Gad, David's seer, ¹⁰"Go and tell David,
'This is what the LORD says: I am giving you three options.
Choose one of them for me to carry out against you.'* "

It is not easy to find occasions in Scripture in which God allows a man who has sinned to choose his discipline. I don't know if you have had that experience, but when God disciplines us, He does so as an expression of His love and in a way that is absolutely just. That is what I want to deal with. What is our attitude toward divine discipline? Here God is telling him to choose. What are your criteria, your way of reasoning? I am going

to give you three options. And via the prophet he lets him know the divine plan and gives him the opportunity of choosing one of them.

¹¹So Gad went to David and said to him, "This is what the LORD says: 'Take your choice: ¹²three years of famine, three months of being swept away before your enemies, with their swords overtaking you, or three days of the sword of the LORD - days of plague in the land, with the angel of the LORD ravaging every part of Israel.' Now then, decide how I should answer the one who sent me."

What a tremendous dilemma: a king recognizing that he has sinned and God giving him the opportunity of choosing the punishment: three years of famine, three months of fleeing from his enemies (probably the Philistines, or other of the neighboring peoples that had made the nation suffer so much), or finally, three days in which God would send a terrible plague throughout the entire land. Here is David's reply.

¹³David said to Gad, "I am in deep distress. **Let me fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is very great;** but do not let me fall into the hands of men."

Knowing the character and justice of God, he knew that he could not escape punishment. With his imagination he probably analyzed and ran over the options, wondering which would be less disastrous: three years of famine, three years of war, or the plague unleashed throughout the land.

We have seen on television heart-rending images, reports and photographs of children with their eyes gouged out, skeletons dying of malnutrition, multitudes of starving Africans. This is happening today, in the twenty-first century, and we see it on the news from different channels. Nevertheless we see this reality as something that happens far away, overseas, on other continents. Seated comfortably in our living room, perhaps enjoying a delicious drink or steak, we watch on television while unknown people die of hunger.

It would be tremendously dramatic to know that this tribulation would become reality in your own family, your own nation, all around you, as a result of your choice. It was not a light matter. There would be three years of drought, desolation, death and desperation. Consequently the king was in anguish.

In second place, he imagines three months of being defeated by the armies of his ungodly enemies, dying by the sword, decapitated, mutilated, wounded. As an expert warrior, he knew perfectly well the glorious victories as well as the horrors of war, the bloodiness of his adversaries, the merciless application of the sword. This alternative implied three months of continuous defeat for his people, his army, battle after battle, bringing destruction to the families of the soldiers, flooding the villages and cities with blood.

For these reasons he chose the third option: to fall into the hands of the Lord, who would apply the correct intensity of punishment. David himself writes in a Psalm: *great are the mercies of the Lord*, that compassionate love that flows mercifully from on high. The word *mercy* implies moderation in the application of justice. Clemency is compassion and also restraint in the application of punishment.

A judge has certain guidelines in sentencing for a determined crime: for example, three to five years in jail. The judge has to decide, but he has a range to apply his justice, analyzing the extenuating circumstances, the arguments of the charge, the defense.

Finally the judge decides. There are some judges more severe than others in their criteria and the use of the discretionary powers that the law gives them.

The judge who has to judge your life, who knows you intimately, the reasoning in your mind, who knows to the last detail the most secret motives and intentions of your heart, is a merciful God as well as a gracious, moderate God who is compassionate in applying discipline to each of his children. Consequently, David writes these words in Psalm 103 verse 8:

*⁸The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.*

Knowing the attributes of God, of all these terrible punishments, undoubtedly equal and proportional to the magnitude of the evil committed, he comes to the wise conclusion that in every case it is preferable **to fall into the hands of God**.

Some feel that he also chose this as a sign of recognition of his own guilt, because probably in the famine he and his family would be protected by the provision from the royal granary and with the resources that the king had he could have preserved his personal integrity and that of his family. He could have survived the famine as well as the war because he could have directed it from a distance away from the soldiers and been well protected. Besides, he counted on loyal and efficient officials who could lead the battles.

Nevertheless, by choosing the plague alternative, both he and his family were more exposed to contamination and death. Hence he elected it, admitting his responsibility, willing to suffer the same risks as the people.

I encourage you now, Christian, son or daughter of the Lord, to always choose to fall into the holy hands of God. It is always good, always better, to walk in the paths of the Lord, even when He has to correct our lives, our acts. The classic text in Hebrews chapter 12 that we have quoted many times, and which is important to know and remember at all times, says:

*My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,*

*⁶because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.*

⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?

There is another text that reinforces this concept of the good that comes from correction:

*³²He who ignores discipline despises himself,
but whoever heeds correction gains understanding. Prov. 15:32*

There is not time to look up many the instances in the Holy Scriptures which relate the dire consequences to the family of actions taken by quarreling parents, permissive parents, parents who did not correct bad attitudes in their children, who did not warn them nor firmly reprimand them. Later these children suffered the consequences: rebellion, suffering, destruction, addictions, and even death. There are many such examples.

You will recall the case of Eli, for example, who did not discipline nor impede the immoral conduct of his sons, honoring the creature more than the Creator. There are many examples of parents who did not reprimand their children. The love of God, the love of our children, should lead us to discipline them, to correct them, to apply reforms to their lives and hearts. The Church also has that faculty of being able to exercise discipline in order to correct and make right the hearts of the sheep in its fold.

*⁸If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline),
then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.*

*⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them
for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!*

The purpose of discipline is to give life.

*¹⁰Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best;
but God disciplines us for our good, **that we may share in his holiness.***

Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you. If there is no sanctification, there are no wonders. The power of God is manifest in the measure that our souls and our lives are sanctified, set apart, consecrated, and adjusted to the divine patterns, to the Lords requirements. Obviously, when the punishment of God falls, it is not pleasant, it is not a happy time, but we know that in the end it brings great benefits for our own souls.

I conclude this exhortation and reflection with the following attitude of David.

When King David saw that the plague had already extended throughout the entire land and the angel of the Lord was ready to pour judgment on Jerusalem, the most precious place he had built, the center, the well protected capital of the kingdom, walled in, securing the life of those within, now exposed to death, when the angel was about to raise his sword, he could endure it no longer and pleaded with the Lord not to touch Jerusalem with the plague, arguing the he was responsible: *"I am the one who has sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? O LORD my God, let your hand fall upon me and my family, but do not let this plague remain on your people."*

How often, dear Christians, due to the decisions of our governments the nations affected are. How many times due to the policies of our leaders all those under their authority are afflicted. Similarly, the decisions you make as parents have repercussions on the entire family, innocent people are affected. Some ask, "How is it possible, if God is just, a God of love, that people die of hunger, perish in an avalanche or other catastrophe, and so many civilians die in wars?" How often are innocent children affected by conjugal fights, by foolish insensitive acts, or for not adhering to God's commands? Many act arbitrarily and foolishly, affecting the most precious thing they have: their family, their children.

Beloved, this is not an insignificant subject. Even in the bosom of marriage, everything that one does affects the other. We repeat this permanently in Marriage Encounter, for better or for worse, your acts, your decisions, and even more, your actions as Christians, affect everyone around you, and many times innocent people must suffer because of the decisions Christians make, especially in situations of transgression, various crimes, sins of rebellion, that bring scandal to the Lord's church and to souls.

So, beloved, before finishing, I want to invite you to do as King David did. What did David do? He recognized his sin in his heart. The first step and the most difficult is to recognize sin before God. The second step, we won't read it, but you can read it at home if you want to go deeper into the story, after God had mercy and the angel of the Lord sheathed his sword, that God of mercy said, "Enough. He has learned his lesson. His pride is gone. He is broken, humbled. He now understands."

Then the LORD spoke to the angel, and he put his sword back into its sheath.

If you are under the divine rod, may the angel of the Lord detain his hand on your shoulder. Perhaps you have learned your lesson. Perhaps it is enough now. I don't know. The Lord knows and you know. I invite you at this time to examine your life and ask the Lord's forgiveness. May he put his sword back into his sheath, or hold back the hand with the whip that is falling on your back trying to correct you.

Once David recognized his sin, suffered the discipline, cried for mercy and received it, he built an altar. What does an altar mean? Here we made it of good quality wood, of Oregon pine as a local expression, a native wood typical of our country. The altar is a symbol of the point of encounter, of reconciliation between God and man, where covenants are sealed, the place of the burnt offering, the sacrifice, and consecration.

The Lord orders him to build an altar in order to clearly remember the covenant. Thus when we invite you to come forward to the altar it is very significant. It is not something light. Man acts on symbols. It is to affirm the commitment you make with God at the altar, that point of communion, of reencounter between creature and Creator at the foot of the cross.

So, confess, recognize, repent, and come to the altar of the Lord. Make a covenant in your heart to change your conduct, to see if that good God will instruct the angel to put his sword back in the sheath and stop the tribulation, the anguish, the suffering, the trial. Meanwhile, don't faint because what is happening to you has a divine purpose. The Lord loves you and wants your sanctification.

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