

QUESTION: What was David's sin in numbering the people, and why did it result in the deaths of 70,000 Israelites?

ANSWER:

In 1 Chronicles 21:7, we read:

"This command was also evil in the sight of God; so He punished Israel."

King David ordered a national census to determine how many fighting men Israel had. On the surface, this may seem like a practical decision for military planning. However, the Bible says this act displeased God greatly. The consequence? A severe plague broke out, and 70,000 Israelites died.

So the big question is: What made this census such a serious sin? And why did so many innocent people suffer for one man's mistake?

1. Misplaced Trust and Pride

While counting people is not inherently sinful, the motive behind the act is what matters to God. According to Exodus 30:11-12, when a census

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was taken, each person had to offer a ransom to the Lord "so that there may be no plague among them when you number them." David failed to do this.

More importantly, David's decision reflected a shift in trust—from reliance on God to confidence in military strength. He wanted to see *the numbers* instead of walking by faith.

Joab, David's military commander, immediately recognized the danger and warned him:

*"Why should my lord bring guilt on Israel?"
—1 Chronicles 21:3*

Despite the warning, David insisted.

Later, David repented:

"I have sinned greatly by doing this... I have done a very foolish thing."

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—1 Chronicles 21:8

This shows that the sin was rooted in pride and self-reliance—which are condemned throughout Scripture (see Proverbs 16:18, Jeremiah 17:5).

2. Why Did Others Suffer for David's Sin?

David himself asked this very question:

“Was it not I who ordered the fighting men to be counted? I, the shepherd, have sinned... These are but sheep. What have they done?”

—1 Chronicles 21:17

It seems unfair—until we understand a deeper biblical truth.

Look at 2 Samuel 24:1

“Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He incited

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David against them, saying, 'Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.'"

This verse shows that God was already angry with the nation of Israel before David acted. The census was not the root cause of the judgment—it was the occasion God used to execute a punishment the people already deserved. Though the Bible doesn't list their exact sins here, Israel had a long history of rebellion—idolatry, injustice, ritual corruption, and shedding innocent blood (see Isaiah 1:2-4, Micah 6:8-13, Hosea 4:1-6).

In that sense, God allowed David's failure to serve as a doorway for His righteous judgment. God's sovereignty over human actions is seen here, where even human mistakes can fulfill divine purposes—without God being the author of evil (see Romans 9:17-22, Genesis 50:20).

3. The Role of Satan and Human Responsibility

Another passage gives even more detail:

"Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of

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Israel."

—1 Chronicles 21:1

So, was it God or Satan who caused David to act?

Theologically, both are true—God permitted it; Satan executed it. Just like in the case of Job (Job 1-2), Satan acts within limits set by God. In David's case, God allowed the temptation to accomplish a greater purpose—to bring judgment on a rebellious nation.

This mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is echoed in James 1:13

"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He himself tempts no one."

Yet, God may permit temptation for purposes of discipline, correction, or judgment.

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4. Modern Application: When Leaders Are Instruments of Judgment

This story teaches us that God may sometimes use leaders—even flawed ones—to bring about His discipline on a people.

We see this with King Nebuchadnezzar, a cruel and powerful ruler. Yet God called him:

"My servant Nebuchadnezzar"
—*Jeremiah 27:6*

God used him to punish nations—including Israel—for their disobedience. Nebuchadnezzar did not know he was being used, but God's purpose still prevailed.

The same principle may apply today. When leaders become corrupt, harsh, or irrational, we should ask: *Is this simply bad leadership, or is God allowing this as a form of correction to turn us back to Him?*

God's Word reminds us:

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*"When the righteous increase, the people rejoice,
but when the wicked rule, the people groan."
—Proverbs 29:2*

This is not to say all suffering is punishment—but sometimes, national or personal hardship is a wake-up call to return to God's ways.

Conclusion

David's census was wrong not because counting was sinful, but because it came from pride, misplaced trust, and disobedience to God's clear instructions. Yet the resulting plague was more than just a punishment for David—it was a divine judgment on a rebellious nation.

God, in His justice and sovereignty, allowed the census to become the means through which He held Israel accountable for their hidden sins. The story reminds us to walk humbly, depend on God, and intercede for our leaders and nations—lest we find ourselves under judgment as well.

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*"If My people who are called by My name humble themselves, and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."
—2 Chronicles 7:14*

May we walk in wisdom, humility, and repentance before the Lord.

Be blessed.

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