

Open Our Eyes

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

Tonight we enter a painful chapter in Israelite history. David's throne room becomes a courtroom. The prophet Nathan enters, acting as both prosecuting attorney and judge. David, the warrior king and man after God's own heart, is the defendant. Until Nathan shows up it seems if David's attempt at damage control just might do the job. With Uriah out of the way, charges of adultery wouldn't be pressed. True, there was that problem of murder on David's conscience. But outwardly things could still be salvaged. Besides Joab, the intelligence community, and Bathsheba, nobody needed to be any the wiser. But all is not well in the land of Israel. The closing verses of 2 Samuel 11 give us subtle and not-so-subtle clues that trouble is brewing for David, trouble bigger than him, trouble his power and management skills can't control. "When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she mourned for him....but what David had done was evil in the eyes of the Lord." (11:26-27).

The writer of Samuel could just as easily deliver the content of these verses another way. Verse 26 could easily say, "When Bathsheba heard that Uriah was dead..." Instead, the writer highlights the marriage relationship and David's series of wrongs to Uriah. Bathsheba's identity is as "Uriah's wife," and his identity is as "her husband" is front and center. God has not forgotten that Uriah's wife was wronged. God has not forgotten that Uriah has paid for David's sin with his life. God is none too pleased with David's breach of covenant. So God sends the Prophet Nathan on a rescue mission to stop David in his tracks, to turn him around, reorient him to the way of his God.

As Nathan enters the palace he thinks of the last time he met with David. Back then, David's future sure had been bright. Back then, Nathan addressed David under very different circumstances. David walked with God. God was ready to give David the world. 2 Samuel 7: "I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. ⁹I have been with you...and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. "[I] will establish a house for you...¹⁶Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever." David had been thunderstruck. "Who am I, Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? ¹⁹And as if this were not enough in your sight, Sovereign LORD, you have also spoken about the future of the house of your servant—and this decree, Sovereign LORD, is for a mere human!" How wonderful it had been to be the bearer of such a message from God, to be there for the joy and awe and thanksgiving and praise.

But today's visit is very different. Nathan wipes sweaty hands on his cloak and licks dry lips before launching into his opening argument before the king; a story of injustice in the kingdom. "Two men lived in a particular city," Nathan begins, "one fabulously rich and the other poor. The rich one had flocks and herds, scads of them, on every hill. But the poor man had nothing at all, except for one little lamb that he raised. It grew up with him and his children, together. It ate from his plate. It drank from his cup. And it lay down in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. When a traveler came to the rich man, did he butcher an animal from his own flock? Not on your life. Instead, he took the pet lamb of the poor man, cooked it, and served it for supper."

David grips the arm of his throne, eyes blazing. This case deserves a verdict! Pronounce one the king shall. “As certainly as the Lord lives, that man is as good as dead. The law says he must pay for that lamb four times over because he did this thing and had no compassion.” “You’re right,” Nathan agrees. “Quite right. And the rich man you just condemned is you. You are the man.” “Open your eyes, David. You are the man.”

David is silent as Nathan lays out God’s case, the accusations coming fast and furious: “I anointed you king over Israel. I snatched you from the hand of Saul. I gave you Saul’s house and Saul’s wives. I gave the houses of Israel and Judah to you. And if this had been too little, I would have added to it abundantly—more and more and more! Why, oh why, David? Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing evil in my sight?”

Like a spouse whose patient, faithful love has been scorned; like a parent whose careful college savings up-all-night love are disdained by a child who is certain she knows best, God asks the agonizing question: Why, oh why, David? Why did you despise the word of God’s promise to you?

Oscar Wilde was a 19th century British playwright with a troubled and sordid personal life. He spent two years in prison for indecent behavior, where he read the Bible, St. Augustine, and other Christian classics. Writing autobiographically, he says: “The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease.... Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in search of new sensation.... I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber, one has some day to cry aloud from the house-top. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and I did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace.” Wilde describes something that happens in the human heart relevant in this case of God versus David: spiritual amnesia. Spiritual amnesia leads us to take for granted the gifts of God, to doubt the promises of God, to rely on our own power, to discount God.

David’s underlying problem is not taking another person’s spouse. His underlying problem is not the murder or the cover up. David’s underlying problem is spiritual amnesia. He forgets God’s greatness and goodness. And he disregards not only God’s commands, but also God’s promises. Both make up the sphere of human life before God’s face. Maybe few of us here relate to the flagrancy of David’s sin. But most of us can relate to forgetting God’s goodness.

There’s a young business graduate with a promising career ahead. Reviews are encouraging. Promotions are forthcoming. Early on she thanks God profusely for his gifts: It’s God, after all, who provided the job! It’s God who provided the education, the will to work. It’s God who placed her in a supportive family and gave her a good head on her shoulders. But as her portfolio grows larger and larger, it’s so easy to put faith in her own abilities, her own hard work and skill. They become the foundation of her success and the drivers of her anxiety. Sooner than you might expect she forgets to thank God for his gifts, forgets to ask for his direction. There’s a middle-aged father caught in a time of life when the good old days seem long ago and far away. He believes in God’s goodness in principle, but it has been awhile since he tasted it. It seems like there isn’t much to be thankful for today. Bills mount and so does the stress, and he longs to feel *something*. He is barely surprised to find himself seriously tempted by a path he knows can’t lead anywhere good.

Spiritual amnesia leads us to disregard and finally disdain God himself. It happened to the man after God's own heart, and it happens to us. Cobwebs accumulate on the furniture of the soul. The memories of God's goodness, the reasons for gratitude and faithfulness grow hazy. We need God to sweep away the dust, throw open the shutters, open our eyes to the goodness of his ways.

In verses 9-10 of chapter 12, Nathan jogs David's memory with a good swift kick, summarizing the charges and pronouncing the verdict: "David, you *killed* Uriah by the sword of the Ammonites; you *took* his wife as his own. Therefore, the sword will never depart from your house; and your own wives will be taken by another in plain sight."

The blood drains from David's face. His pulse pounds in his ears. He doesn't further anger God with denials. No blame shifting or excuses. He doesn't throttle God's prophet either; something future kings will do when they don't like what they hear. The one running as fast as possible and as far as possible to keep ahead of sin's consequences becomes a model of contrition. He enters a guilty plea. Somehow two little Hebrew words make it past the lump in his throat: "I have sinned against the Lord." If he was on the run from God before, David is coming home now. God's swift kick has had its intended effect. David remembers who God is; and who he is. And he casts himself on the mercy of the Divine Judge. David condemns Nathan's rich man to death—or at least fourfold repayment—for a stolen lamb. How much more does David himself deserve such a punishment? But God's first words to David in response to his confession are not words of punishment but of mercy: "Yahweh has forgiven your sin," Nathan says. "You will not die." David's consequences are severe. Bathsheba's son will die—a hard punishment for us to understand. The royal family will begin to disintegrate. Later David's own son will take his father's wives and assert himself as king. The sins of David's heart have grown and given birth to public, far-reaching consequences. Yet God's judgment of David is more merciful than David's judgment of the rich man. David's sins are removed, gone. David will not die in his sin, cut off from his people and his God. He remains king in Israel. His reign will no longer thrive. But it will continue, limping along within the context of God's promises and commands, woven somehow into a kingdom that will never end.

A thousand years after the time of David, the promised King comes. And entrance into his kingdom is not about being born into the right family. It's not about being able to keep God's commands perfectly or correcting our own spiritual amnesia. It's about opening our eyes - seeing this King's model, humanity the way it was meant to be before God's face. It's about looking in the mirror with all our defenses gone, saying with David, "I have sinned against God." It's about casting ourselves on the mercy of the Divine Judge who, for the sake of his inexplicable love, also acts as defendant in our case. For the sake of his great love, King Jesus' hands are pierced; his side bleeds; his lungs collapse, and, unlike David, this King dies under the weight of sin. He does it not only for your sin and for my sin, but for the sin of the whole world. Amazing.

So we come to worship to remember. With open eyes and empty hands, in our frailty and forgetfulness, we come. We come with others trying to follow Jesus, "encouraging one another daily, as long as it is called "today," so that none of us are hardened by sin's deceitfulness." We come to touch and taste grace made edible in bread and wine; to hear and feel grace splashed out in baptism. So we come to worship to remember. Christ has removed our sin as far as the east is from the west. Glory be to our great God.

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