

David and Bathsheba

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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2 Samuel 11

“But the thing David had done displeased the Lord”, that is a masterpiece of literary understatement. What David does here is pretty terrible. Even when you think you know the story, when you hear it read again, you realize, “Oh Wow! It’s even worse than I remembered.” And the Lord is seriously displeased.

Do you remember how the Lord shows his displeasure? The Lord sends Nathan to confront David. You probably remember that Nathan does so indirectly, with a story. He comes to David and tells David that there is something that happened in the Kingdom and he needs the king to make a judgement. In those days, that was part of David’s kingly duties. He had to make judgments on cases that were brought before him. Nathan says, “My King, there is a rich man in your kingdom who had abundant flocks and herds and abundant wealth. Next door to him lived a poor man who only had one little lamb to his name. This lamb was like a pet to the poor man. He gave it scraps from his table. The lamb even slept in his bed at night. The lamb was like his child. One day the rich man had company for dinner. But instead of taking one of his lambs and using it for the meal, the rich man took the pet lamb from his poor neighbor. He slaughtered it and made dinner from the poor man’s pet.

David the judge hears this story and he flies into a rage. “The man who did this must die!” he says. And then, having heard David’s judgment and his sentence, Nathan drops the bomb: “You are the man!” “Uriah was the poor man. Bathsheba was the lamb and you my king, you are the man! You have pronounced your own judgment.” Talk about courtroom drama. David is crushed under the weight of his guilt. He admits everything. “I have sinned against the Lord!”

Indeed, he has. It’s not pleasant, but let’s take a close look at David’s sins. I’ll do that in four scenes.

Scene One: David on the roof checking out Bathsheba. David shouldn’t be on that roof in the first place, where should he be? He should be out in the field with the armies of Israel. Dave Bast hinted at that last week already. This is the time of year when kings go to war, and David used to go out with his armies to fight. But lately all that seems like a lot of work. “I’ve nothing left to prove,” David says to himself, “I’ve whipped my enemies. I’ve established my kingdom. Enough sleeping in tents. Enough getting up at the crack of dawn with the bugle call; I want to spend the morning in my bathrobe with a cup of coffee.” So Joab goes out, and David stays home.

And what does David do with his spare time? He’s not meeting the people. He’s not working to bring aid to the orphans and the widows. He’s not helping the poor. Look at verse 2: “One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace.” David is lying in bed. He’s lounging in his housecoat. He’s binging Netflix, and eating potato chips. Restless, he gets up and goes up to the roof and starts scrolling through the ancient equivalent of Tinder. He swipes left and finds Bathsheba.

David has been anointed to lead his people, to do God’s work among them, but he’s not doing what he’s called to do. He’s looking to grab a little fun and hold it in a clenched fist. If you want to get technical, at the beginning of our passage, David is gripped by sloth. Sloth is a state where you’re bored and tired of life. The work and the calling that used to excite you seems ho hum, so now you’re just looking for something to spark your appetite, something to make you feel alive. That’s David’s spiritual state on the roof. Sloth is a sin especially common among wealthy and comfortable people. Like David. And like you and me.

Scene 2. The bedroom. Look at the way the Bible describes his encounter with Bathsheba. There’s so little intimacy in it. There’s no conversation. No questions. No asking for permission. It’s just a series of forceful verbs. David sees her, he summons her, he sleeps with her. She goes home. It’s pretty brutal. Here’s a question: Is David guilty of rape? The way the text is written doesn’t do anything to absolve David of that crime. Whatever your verdict, David behaves like a privileged tyrant. He sees what he wants and takes it.

Scene 3. The Con. Once he knows that Bathsheba is pregnant, David makes two attempts to con Uriah into sleeping with his wife. First he gives Uriah home leave, but Uriah refuses to take it. Then he gets Uriah drunk and still Uriah refuses to stay with his wife. Did you notice the irony of Uriah's refusal? Uriah says, 'My comrades are out on the battlefield sleeping in tents, the ark is out there with them, how can I go home and make love to my wife while they're living in discomfort!' David apparently has no such qualms. He slept with Uriah's wife without a thought for the armies or the ark. Uriah's integrity makes David's sin look even worse. And remember Uriah is a Hittite! He's a foreigner. The righteousness of this Hittite puts Israel's anointed king to shame.

Scene 4. The Murder. You'd think Uriah's integrity would shame David into telling the truth and admitting his sin. You'd be wrong. David doubles down. He calls up his Colonel Jessup, General Joab. If you read the whole arc of the David stories, Joab is David's fixer. He's ruthless. He tells Joab to put Uriah out in front of the fighting where there's the most danger. Joab does exactly that. In fact, he puts a whole group of men, including Uriah, right under the city wall. A foolish maneuver because anyone can drop a stone on you and kill you. Predictably Uriah is killed along with a number of other innocent men.

So David doesn't just murder Uriah. It's mass murder. A whole group of good men die as part of the cover up. David commits mass murder, and for what? For the sake of his reputation, for the sake of his poll numbers, so he can still walk through the streets to the sound of cheers, so that he can still lounge in his palace.

Can it get any worse? Yes, it can. Do you know who Uriah is? Do you know David's relationship to him? Go to 2 Samuel 24 today and look at the very last verse of that chapter. Uriah is one of David's mighty men. The mighty men were 30 of David's most loyal soldiers. They are the ones who stood by him in the worst of times. These are the guys who stuck with David when he was on the run from Saul. These are the guys who'd lived in caves with David. David doesn't just murder a random soldier; David betrays and murders a loyal friend. And basically he does it with a kiss. The Imperfect Anointed. That's what we called this series and we used the word imperfect because of stories like this one, though in this case, imperfect doesn't seem like a strong enough word.

What do we do with this story? Here's what we are tempted to do with it: We're tempted to look at David, shake our head sadly and say, "David, how could you do such a thing!?" We want to say "Wow, David you're a mess. David I can't believe you did that. David really messed up, didn't he?" Of course, if we do that, what's happening inside us? We are subtly holding David's sin at arm's length. With one hand we wag our finger at David, with the other we pat ourselves on the back. "I'm glad I've never done anything that bad! I would never go that far!"

If that's in us, I want to do for us what Nathan did for David. After he heard Nathan's parable, David's first reaction was to judge "that man". As in: "That man deserves to die." If that's our initial temptation with the David story, then, like Nathan, I want to say to you, "You are that man." "You are David." This story isn't just here to show us the complexity of David's heart and the frailty of David's heart and the weakness of David's heart. This story is here to show us the complexity, the frailty, and the weakness of our hearts too.

Step back and ask the question, "Why did the author of Samuel take the time to show David's sin so completely?" The basics of David's adultery and the murder could have been laid out in a paragraph. But we don't get the basics; instead we get all the details of David's hypocrisy and lust and sloth and lies and cynicism. We don't get a wide shot of David's sin; we get an ugly close up.

And this ugly close up forms a shocking contrast with the other things we know about David. This is the same man who danced before the ark. This is the same man who showed great faith when he faced down Goliath. This the same man who showed deep mercy when he refused to kill Saul. This is the same man who wrote so many of the Psalms which give expression to our faith. The same man who commits this atrocity is the one who wrote "The Lord is My Shepherd," The one who did this is the same one who said in Psalm 26, "I have trusted the Lord and not faltered! I have always been mindful of your unfailing love." We are used to holding up Psalm 51 to this story, which is good, because it is David's expression of repentance for this sin. But you should also hold this story up to some of David's other Psalms. Like Psalm 28: Do not make me a victim of

the wicked, “with those who do evil, with those who speak cordially with their neighbors but harbor malice in their hearts. Repay them for what they’ve done. Bring back on them what they deserve.” I don’t know, but I’m guessing David wrote Psalm 28 before the incident with Bathsheba.

Does all this make David some sort of titanic hypocrite, some two-faced monster? No, it makes him human. The complexities and the contradictions in David’s heart that make us shudder are in the hearts of every person here.

Do you know the book *Ordinary Men*? It’s written by a historian named Christopher Browning. It follows the work of a single German reserve police battalion in Poland during the Second World War. This battalion was one of the battalions who were in charge of exterminating Jews. Battalion 101 killed hundreds and hundreds of men, woman and children. Of course we all know about the holocaust and we know that it was perpetrated by German soldiers. But Browning goes through records of interviews with these men after the war, he researches their lives before the war, and what he finds is that they are, as the title suggests, ordinary men. Butchers, bakers and candlestick makers. Churchgoers. Men who wept at the baptisms of their children. Men who made profession of faith. Men who sang hymns in church every Sunday. Men who prayed over their dinner. When you imagine the holocaust being carried out by faceless soldiers with swastikas on their lapels, it’s easy to keep it all at a distance. But when you read the stories of the men of Battalion 101, the killers get uncomfortably close to you and you can feel as though you are looking in a mirror.

You are the man!! The Bible shows us both the beauty of David’s faith and the horror of David’s sin to remind us of the complexity and weakness of our own hearts. The David stories show us that, while our hearts are capable of transcendent good, they are also capable of dark thoughts and terrible deeds.

But that’s not the only reason or even the main reason Samuel shows us David’s sin so vividly. Samuel paints David’s sin so clearly so that we will know where our help comes from. If ever we are tempted to think David is the hero of Samuel, if ever we are tempted to think that David’s courage and faith are what saves Israel, this story puts an end to that. God’s mercy is the hope of this story. God’s grace and mercy is the only thing holding this thing together. God gives David mercy. David suffers the consequences of his sin. From now on there will be turbulence in his family, but God doesn’t take the kingdom from him, unlike Saul.

Which raises a really interesting question, one that I’ve been thinking about this week. Saul’s kingdom was taken away from him, but was Saul’s sin worse than David’s? Was Saul a worse guy than David? Saul was rejected because he refused to follow God’s command about the Amalekites. Was that sin worse than David’s? I don’t think so. God’s mercy to David here is not based on what a good guy David is; as David himself has correctly stated in chapter 12, he deserves death. But God gives life and it’s out of pure mercy. Pure undeserved grace. It’s the same grace that is the only hope for all our fickle hearts. It reminds me of a quote from RC Sproul. “Christians have nothing to be smug about; we are not righteous people trying to correct the unrighteous. [We are] just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” David, Saul, Me you, we are all of us beggars in need of life-giving bread.

This week I learned something from Tim Keller that he learned from Eugene Peterson. He noted an interesting parallel between this story and the story of Jesus’ crucifixion in the gospel of John. What does Nathan say when he finally confronts David? “You are the man.” What does Pilate say when he presents Jesus to the crowds. “Behold the man.” There is a parallel here, only the roles are reversed. In the case of David, he was the guilty one but he was sitting in the seat of the judge. In the case of Jesus, he was the innocent one and he was the true judge of the earth, but he’s the one who receives the death sentence. He gets the death sentence that David deserves, that you and I deserve, and in its place, he gives us grace and forgiveness.

That parallel reminds us where our hope for this life comes from. David gets mercy because of Jesus. You and I get mercy because of Jesus. Because of Jesus, all of us beggars get bread. Our hearts are fickle things, but his heart is strong and firm and full of love, and that love has a hold on us.

Over the course of studying the books of Samuel, here’s what I think I would say. Saul is a better person than I remembered. David is a worse person than I remembered. But my hope is not in either of them, or in any human ruler. My hope is in Jesus. And so is yours.

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