

“David the Repentant Sinner”

(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 82)

2 Samuel 11.1 – 12.25; Psalm 51

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David was an incredibly strong and faithful king. He secured Israel’s borders and constantly asked God for guidance when facing difficult decisions. David left a lasting legacy of faith-filled poetry, heartfelt prayers to God which are enshrined in our scriptures and especially in the book of Psalms. There were many things David did *extremely* well; there are reasons why he was remembered with such admiration. But he wasn’t perfect. None of us is perfect. All of us struggle with the human tendency to sin. There came a day when sin got the better of King David. The story is told in the book of 2 Samuel.

Israel is at war with the Ammonites. David sends the army off to battle; he remains in Jerusalem. “One evening,” the writer tells us, “David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful.” (2 Samuel 11.2) The story starts there. The story could have *ended* there, as well. David sees this woman bathing, he notices her beauty, but he could have looked away. That’s what he *should* have done. That’s what *any* married man should do, when a beautiful woman catches his eye; what any married woman should do, when an attractive man catches her eye. You notice, you look away ... it’s when you take that *second* look that you’re in trouble. God created beauty; we are meant to appreciate beauty; there is nothing wrong with enjoying the visual delights of this majestic creation – that’s what *art* is all about – and even the visual delights of the human body. In the Song of Songs, the Bible’s book of love poetry, it’s abundantly clear that the man and the woman in that book enjoy *looking* at each other, admiring each other’s beauty, and that there’s *nothing wrong* with that. But the Bible also makes it abundantly clear that there are certain boundary lines that we are not to cross. One boundary is the covenant of marriage: if you’re married, everybody other than your spouse is off-limits; if you’re not married, everybody who’s married is off-limits. Another boundary is that fine line between appreciation of beauty and full-blown lust: when you *desire* that beauty for your own pleasure in ways that are inappropriate. In the book of Job, Job declares: “I made a covenant with my eyes, not to look lustfully at a young woman.” (Job 31.1) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5.28) In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, Paul advises anybody who is not married and burning with passion to get married. (1 Corinthians 7.8-9) There *is* a place where sexual desire and enjoyment is *entirely* appropriate: within the covenant of marriage. And *only* within the covenant of marriage.

David is married. The Bible tells us he's got *seven wives* by this point in the story! If he's in the mood, he has *seven* choices to choose from. But when he sees this woman bathing, all thoughts of those seven legitimate women flee from his mind, and he is consumed with lust for *that woman*, and that woman alone. Never mind the fact that she, too, is married, as he soon learns. He *should* have averted his eyes, he should have done whatever he needed to do to get that image of her naked body out of his head, he should have tried his best to just forget about her. If that wasn't easy for him then he should have talked about his struggle with a trusted friend, or a mentor, or directly with God. David probably didn't know that verse from Job and he certainly knew nothing about Jesus or Paul, but he *should* have known the Ten Commandments. "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." (Exodus 20.17) "You shall not commit adultery." (Exodus 20.14) He himself had brought the Ten Commandments into Jerusalem, on the stone tablets, in the Ark of the Covenant! *He knew better*. He also knew that in his country, adultery was such a serious offense that the punishment for it was death.

But, overwhelmed by his lust, overpowered by sin, defeated by the "flaming arrows of the evil one" (Ephesians 6.16), David turns his back on God, on his faith, on his honor, on his integrity, on his marriage vows. He has the woman – Bathsheba – brought to his palace, to his bed. She becomes pregnant. Her husband Uriah is off at the war front. David arranges for him to come home, so that husband and wife can make love, so that David can pretend that Uriah is the father of the child that David illegitimately sired. David even tries to get Uriah drunk to make it more likely that Uriah will do as David wishes. The plan doesn't work; Uriah proves to be a more honorable man than David; he will not return home to enjoy a night with his wife while the men under his command have no such opportunity with *their* own wives. In desperation, David arranges to have Uriah killed: he tells his general to place Uriah in the battle right where the fighting is fiercest, and then withdraw so that Uriah will die. So David violates a *third* commandment: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20.13). Uriah dies and Bathsheba mourns. As soon as possible, David brings Bathsheba to his palace and marries her. "But," the writer tells us, "the thing David had done displeased the LORD." (2 Samuel 11.27)

Of course it displeased the Lord. David had a good heart; that's one of the first things we were told about him; God chose him to be king of Israel because of the goodness of David's heart. But even people with the purest of hearts struggle with temptation. Even people with the purest of hearts cross lines they shouldn't cross. Even people with the purest of hearts do things that displease the Lord.

What temptations do you struggle with? What lines have you crossed that you shouldn't have crossed? What things have you done that have displeased the Lord? What sins have you committed that you have tried to cover up or hide? It doesn't work, does it? Even if you manage to fool everybody around you, *you* still know what you did; *you* still carry the pain of those decisions; *you* still bear that guilty conscience; *you* still live with the knowledge that God can see right through you. You can try to fake it. But it never works. Sooner or later, *you will* have to face the truth. And the consequences.

God sends a prophet named Nathan to confront David. Nathan tells David about a rich man who feeds a needy traveler, not by cooking one of his own sheep but by taking and cooking a poor man's one-and-only sheep instead. David is outraged; he exclaims, "The man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity." (2 Samuel 12.5-6)

Nathan looks at David and declares, “*You are the man.*” (2 Samuel 12.7) *You* are the man who has committed a terrible sin. *You* are the man who deserves to die. *You* are the man who has to face the consequences. For striking down Uriah, “the sword will never depart” from David’s house. The peace that David secures during his lifetime will not last once he is dead. For taking the wife of Uriah, God tells David, “before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight.” (2 Samuel 12.11-12) We’ll hear how that happens next week.

Sins have consequences. God is a righteous judge. Don’t give me that nonsense about how the Old Testament God is a God of judgment and the New Testament God is a God of love – because *both* aspects of God’s nature are *fully* present in *both* Testaments. Too often people use God’s grace as a cover to avoid facing the reality of their sin. Don’t delude yourself. All sins have consequences. Sooner or later there will come a day when you will have to face the truth about what you have done.

But what’s so amazing about God is that he offers *grace* for those who truly repent. For those who have the courage to *face* the judgment they so rightfully deserve, for those who have the *integrity* to acknowledge their sin and admit their wrongs. Nathan’s words to David hit home. David realizes just how wrong he has been. He looks back over his poor choices with shame and regret, and says – with all sincerity – “I have sinned against the LORD.” (2 Samuel 12.13) This is David’s prodigal son moment, the moment when he realizes that he has squandered his inheritance and is no longer worthy of the Father’s blessings. Humble and repentant, he is ready to face the consequences ... and God offers grace. “The LORD has taken away your sin,” Nathan declares. “You are not going to die.” (2 Samuel 12.13) *David deserved death. But God offers life.* God hands out grace. God wipes away sin. Just like Jesus does for us, taking upon himself the sins *we* are guilty of, the sins for which *we* deserve punishment. *Only* by the grace of God does David remain alive. *Only* by the grace of God do we receive forgiveness.

A son is born to Bathsheba. He becomes ill. “David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground.” (2 Samuel 12.16) After seven days of pleading and weeping and praying, David’s son dies. This is the last consequence of David’s sin. David had to live the rest of his life with that pain in his heart. The *only* reason that child died was because of David’s sin. David comforts his wife Bathsheba; she becomes pregnant a second time; she gives birth to a legitimate son; they name him Solomon. He will become the next king of Israel, the successor to David’s throne.

David’s repentance is retold in song. Psalm 51, “a psalm of David,” we read, “when the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.” It is a beautiful psalm, one of the most important in the whole book, one that you should be familiar with so that you can find it on those days when you know that *you* have done something that has displeased the Lord. David may have written this psalm as he faced the reality of his sin, but *we* need this psalm when *we* face the reality of *our* sin. When you have strayed from the path, when your heart has wandered, when you wonder how God could *ever* forgive you for what you did – these words will help restore your relationship with God. These words will help you experience God’s amazing grace. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me....”

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