

“What Do We Do with David?”

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I am David.

2 Samuel 12:1-14

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We learn from him

The story of King David as told in 1 and 2 Samuel is thoroughly unpredictable. In one passage he seems like a spiritual giant – waiting, trusting, leading, and building a legacy of justice and kindness. In the next, we wonder if he will be another Saul. He lies, he doubts, he flees, he lusts, he murders, he hides.

The rest of the Bible treats David as almost flawless. Subsequent kings of Israel and Judah are compared to him in character and faithfulness to God. He is the GOAT (Greatest of All Time) of kings, the ancestor of Messiah. If all you had was the New Testament, you would never know about Bathsheba or Uriah or David’s alliance with the Philistine king or his disastrous family life. What do we do with David?

We don’t have to judge him. He was a king in the Middle East 3000 years ago. We can note his flaws and failures, but we also need to admit that we might have done what David did we had been in his shoes in his time. Success entitles. Power corrupts. Indulgence deceives. David actually was much better than his contemporaries.

Even more importantly, as we look at passages like the one we read this morning, we must not judge God. It’s not our place to say that what God did or said in a given context was unfair or unworthy or unholy. It’s not wise to try to answer questions from this text that the original readers were not asking.

So what do we do with David? We learn from him. 2 Samuel 12, coupled with the psalms of David, teach us spiritual lessons. As I noted a couple of weeks ago, the narrator doesn’t tell us what those lessons are. Some of them are obvious.

Four lessons

First, no one can unsin. Most details of David's most infamous sin are well-known, and repeated by Nathan. With all God had done for him – anointing him as king and delivering him from Saul, giving him Saul's dynasty and wives, placing him as ruler over a united kingdom, David killed one of his 30 mighty men, Uriah, with the sword of the Ammonites, and added Uriah's wife to his other eight wives.

If all we had was 2 Samuel 11, we might assume David forgot how grievous had been his wrongs. There had been no confrontation, no consequences, for at least nine months and it could have been years. The timeline is unclear and unimportant.

This is where the Psalms of David help. We have at least one psalm David wrote after Nathan confronted him, Psalm 51. The title says so. We will read that one shortly. Psalm 32 fits as well. What was going on inside David's head?

*When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long. (Psalm 32:3)*

These words transform my attitude toward David from antipathy to empathy, from disgust to compassion, from a desire to distance myself from him to a desire to get close. I want David to know it's safe to be honest with me. Those were far from happy months where he was just enjoying life with his latest sexual conquest. He was struggling – spiritually, emotionally, even physically.

David has done horrible things. But he can't unsin at this point. He can't undo what he's done. No one can. The message of the Bible is not that when you sin, you are obligated to emotionally and spiritually bear that weight from now until you die. You can't go backwards. I think this helps relate to others, even ourselves, when terrible evils become a tangled mess of horrible consequences.

Second, anyone can repent. David doesn't have to stay in that place where he feels God's hand heavy on him, where his bones are crushed, where he has no joy. He can repent. That way is open to him, and it's open to us as well.

A few months ago, someone asked me why I don't say more about repentance in my sermons. It's a fair question, a helpful question. I have thought about it a lot. Maybe it's a weakness in my preaching.

My answer was that I try to stick to the text itself and not bring everything I know about the Bible or faith into any one sermon. This is certainly one of the places where we must talk about repentance. Repentance is a change of course, and God is clearly calling David not to unsin but to name what he had done as evil. David must be brought to the place where he says, "I have sinned against the LORD."

Why? Some of the answer to that question is about David's position and his sin. Remember that he is a replacement for Saul, who never truly acknowledged the depth of his arrogance and, more importantly, continued the pattern all his life. David, on the other hand, is to be a prototype for his nation. His example is not one of never having sinned; his example is to reverse course and seek the Lord again.

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD."
And you forgave
the guilt of my sin. (Psalm 32:5)*

Repentance is not wallowing in shame. It is action, not emotion. Repentance is reversing the course from a path that will not only destroy us and distance ourselves from God but will destroy others as well. David's disregard of Bathsheba's freedom and worth, his treatment of her as an object for his pleasure led to a cascading ripple effect that, as we will see, destroyed others.

The repentance needs to be as public as the sin. If the sin was only between you and God, keep the confession there as well. If it was known only in your family, go to them. If a wider circle knows about the sin, there is great freedom in confessing it.

Third, someone can confront. I don't think the point of this text is that everyone should be a Nathan, that everyone should point out any sin they see in someone else.

But there are times when someone should confront. There are times for intervention, for speaking truth to power, for taking the risk to tell someone, "This is offensive to God." "You're killing yourself." "You're destroying your family."

Nathan's approach and timing are wise. The narrator tells us, "The Lord sent Nathan to David," so we can't give Nathan too much credit. I'm not sure I would want to be Nathan in this situation. It certainly carried emotional and spiritual risk to approach the monarch.

We don't know whether the story of the rich rancher and the poor sharecropper was a parable or an actual legal case, but it's perfect in its parallel. A guy who has large flocks and herds takes a pet lamb to make himself look generous in hospitality for a traveler. David could have any eligible woman in the kingdom. There had been no divine reprimand for his polygamy. But he took a man's one wife and then his life.

David had tried to establish a culture of justice and kindness in Israel. It seems as if he overreacts at first to Nathan's story. "The man who did this must die!" and then remembers the actual requirement of the Law – fourfold restitution. The punishment must fit the crime, or justice hasn't been carried out.

David knows what it's like to be on the receiving end of a rebuke. In Psalm 32 he says,

*Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you. (Psalm 32:9)*

It's not so much about whether we're courageous enough to confront someone else. It's about whether we're open to being confronted. Is there someone close enough to me who has permission to tell me when I'm being hypocritical or defensive? To say to me, "You're sinning against God. You're killing yourself. The collateral damage is frightening"? Who has permission to say that to you?

When David erupts with indignation, Nathan has him where he wants him. "You are the man!"

Finally, everyone needs God. The consequences seem severe. The baby will die. The family will disintegrate. David's wives will be shamefully abused in daylight.

This is where I say we are not in a position to judge God. Why must innocent people suffer for David's sin? I don't know. The whole thing seems awful to me. It is not my place to defend or accuse God. If there is a larger picture playing out for David, there is an even larger one in the mind of God.

The rest of the chapter tells how David pleads with God for a week. He is terrified that he will become the next Saul:

*"Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me." (Psalm 51:11)*

Samuel tells David, "The LORD has taken away your sin."

His fasting and prayer do not save the life of the child, nor does it alter the inevitable disintegration of his family. It's important to mention here that one lesson we're not learning from David's experience is that we can conclude the death of someone's child – or a hurricane or other disaster – is God's punishment.

David writes in Psalm 32 the effect of this grace on him.

*Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.*

God is bigger than this moment. David and Bathsheba have four more sons, and one of them is the mother of Solomon, and in Matthew's genealogy the legal ancestor

of Jesus. Once again, we have another reminder that God's choice is not by merit, only by grace. Still, the royal family is a mess during David's lifetime, and Solomon is even worse than David in the accumulation of wives and concubines. Still, there is a plan unfolding here, and it's something only God can do.

This is the lesson for David as a person, for Bathsheba, for Solomon and every king who follows, for every Israelite and every believer in Jesus. We're not going to stop the sinning among God's people. We're not going to reverse the consequences of evil choices – big ones and great ones. Horrible things happen when we reject God's way, when we hide in shame or in rationalization, when we confront and even when we judge, when individuals and families and kingdoms and generations ignore justice and kindness and holiness and faith.

The redemption of stories as awful as this one require us to believe. We have to believe God enough to wait, to redeem, to create an even larger mosaic from this broken mess that will accomplish his purposes.

The consequences of sin are both terrifying and beautiful. Wherever you are in your own spiritual journey, wherever the church is, The Church is, the nation and the world are, whatever the devastation caused by natural disasters or human transgression, God is not done with the story. No sin or series of sins is too great for God to forgive and redeem. What a Savior!

The angle of grace

There are so many possible directions one can take this story. I tend to default to the angle of grace. But not like this: "There but for the grace of God go I." That sounds like, "I'm so glad the grace of God has kept me from being as bad as David."

As the rest of the Bible unfolds this text, the lesson is "I am David." We are not meant to gaze at David and try to unravel his complexity. We are meant to gaze at ourselves. I have sinned. I have rationalized. The way Jesus defines it, I have committed adultery. The way Jesus defines it, I have murdered. We all become experts at living with our sin, hoping others will look the other way and assuming God is doing the same.

But here's another way we are like David. Through the lens of the cross, that sin never happened. My slate has been wiped clean. Like David, I am royalty, graced and privileged not because of what I have done but because God chose me.

In a moment we'll read together 51. It begins with that beautiful word *hesed* (kindness) to convey God's rich grace. Paul will later write, "It's your kindness that leads us to repentance." When you and I understand the depth of our own sin and the cost of God's redemption in the cross of Jesus, we can't possibly say, "Let us sin more that grace may abound." In gratitude we say, "God, I'm yours. I repent. I believe. Don't give up on me. Keep changing me to make me more like Jesus. Amen."