

David Teaches Us How to Repent

Psalm 51, 2 Samuel 11:1-12:13

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February 21, 2010

There it was, the first Friday in Lent—in Cincinnati the giant kickoff of the Fish Fry season, in New Orleans the first sober weekend in months—and there on TV was Tiger Woods repenting of his sin. It seemed ironic that the only person I saw even trying to get into the spirit of Lent was a Buddhist. He might have done better if he had read directly from Psalm 51, a confession of sin attributed to someone even worse, because while Tiger got all the therapeutic twelve-step language right in his apology the childhood Buddhism he embraced really lacks the categories of sin and forgiveness and even God, and it showed. There are many who are reluctant to forgive Tiger. There are many who cannot forgive the Tiger in their own tanks. But the amazing message of the Bible is that God can forgive Tiger and people much worse than Tiger—and he commands us to do the same.

King David was the greatest hero in the history of Israel. He was a singer and a warrior, a lover and a fighter. Most of all, he was the king God loved. God promised to establish his throne forever, and the rest of the Old Testament looks back to that promise. In the New Testament, the whole idea of a Messiah is that one day there will be another king like David. David was absolutely the greatest king they ever had. No contest.

But David was a fallen hero. The scandal he was involved in makes people like John Edwards and Mark Sanford seem pretty tame. He managed to break at least half of the Ten Commandments all at once. And yet he continued to be the greatest hero of God's people. More amazingly, he continued to be the king that God loved. How did that happen?

Here's the answer: God forgave David. It is important that David confessed his sin, but it is even more important that it is God's nature to be merciful. The story of David and Bathsheba is not told in the Bible to show that kings are bad—that's old news. The story is told to show that God is good. Before we look at Psalm 51, I want to remind you of the back-story. It's probably worse than you remember. It's a good thing the kids have left the room. It's recorded in 2 Samuel 11-12.

It was spring, after the rainy season was over, when a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love, and, the story says, the time when kings go off to war. But this year David had had enough of fighting. He let the younger men go off to fight for him while he relaxed in the capital city. He let them take the Ark of the Covenant out to the battlefield so the Lord would be with the army, but David was not with the army. He was home, but he could not sleep. Maybe he was lonely. He went up on the flat roof of his palace to get some fresh air, and from that high point in the city he looked down on to roofs of all the houses below. He saw a woman bathing herself, getting ready for bed; no doubt she thought she had privacy up on the roof at night. But David saw her and wanted her for himself.

The king sent someone from his staff to learn her name. The man reported that her name was Bathsheba, and that she was the wife of a soldier named Uriah, who was off fighting the war. Rather than feel some obligation toward this soldier who was under his command, rather than feel some respect for the laws against coveting a neighbor's wife and committing adultery, David told his aides to bring Bathsheba to him. We have no reason to think that Bathsheba had a choice about this. David went ahead and had sex with her. Before long, she sent word to David that she was pregnant. This was a problem. If people found out she got pregnant while her husband was away at war, they might trace everything back to David. So the cover-up began.

David ordered the husband, Uriah, to report to the palace. David made chit-chat with him, asking how the war was going. Then the king said to the soldier in a casual way, "Since you're home, you might as well head to your house and take it easy." Literally he said, "Don't you want to wash your feet?" but in the Hebrew "feet" is often a euphemism for private parts. The point was to make it look like Uriah got his wife pregnant. David even sent a gift to Uriah's house so he would look generous.

But the next day David found out that Uriah didn't go home and sleep with his wife. David called him in. "What's the deal? You're a soldier who hasn't had a woman all this time—and you didn't go home to your wife?" Uriah said, "The Ark and my unit are camped out in the field in battle. I can't go home and party as if nothing is happening. I am a soldier." Of course, David himself had once lived by the code of duty and honor.

David ordered Uriah to stay one more night and tried to get him drunk so he would make love to his wife. Even drunk, Uriah was too honorable to do anything but sleep on a mat on the ground with his commander's servants.

This is where it gets really creepy. If David could not cover up his crime by making everyone think the baby was Uriah's child, he would have to commit another crime so he could marry Bathsheba himself right away. This is not love; this is protecting himself politically. David wrote a letter to the general at the front: "Put Uriah on the front line, then withdraw so that he will be struck down and die." David sealed the letter—and this strikes me as really Shakespearean—then he told Uriah to deliver his own death sentence to his commander. On the battlefield, the general obeyed the order from the king, and sent word back to David, "Uriah is dead." David sent a message to his general, "Don't let this upset you." David also sent word to Bathsheba that her husband was dead, and she grieved for him. But as soon as the mandatory period of mourning was over, David brought her to the palace and made her his wife before the baby was born. The biblical historian notes, "But the thing David had done displeased the Lord."

The Lord sent a prophet named Nathan to confront the king with his sin. He told a story: "There were two men—one rich and one poor. The rich man had many sheep and cattle, while the poor man had only one little lamb. It was his pet, drinking from his cup and sleeping in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Well, the rich man had a guest he had to serve dinner to, and rather than use one of his many sheep or cattle he stole the little lamb from the poor man and prepared it for dinner."

The story made David angry. He swore that the man who did this would die. But Nathan looked David in the eye and said, "You are the man!" Then he pronounced an oracle from the Lord: "I made you king. I gave you wives. I gave you the whole country. If you needed anything more, I would have given it to you. But you chose to despise my commandments and murder Uriah and steal his wife. Here is the judgment: you will live with violence all your life. Your own family will bring violence upon you and one of your own sons will sleep with your wife in broad daylight."

Surely David deserved to be impeached—or struck dead by God on the spot. But that's not what happens.

David says to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Here's the surprise. Nathan replies, "The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die." Tragically, the baby will die, but you will continue to be king. Your dynasty will continue through this woman you stole. The Lord is saying to David: in spite of all you have done, I still love you. It is as if God repeated the words he said to Moses: "I am the LORD, the merciful and gracious God. I am slow to anger and rich in unfailing love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6).

Hebrew tradition says that Psalm 51 is the prayer of David after Nathan confronted him with his sin. It seems to me that David is as heroic in this psalm as anywhere in the Bible. He combines honesty about his sin with humility before God. David is the hero of Israel not because he was the sinless king

but because he was the king who loved God and cared more about repairing his relationship with God than about keeping up appearances. Psalm 51 is a model of how to repent.

Let me highlight four things David teaches us about how to repent.

1. Start with God's love. Begin by remembering who you are praying to. In the very first verse of the psalm, David uses three key words to describe God's nature, the very words God used about himself in Exodus: mercy, steadfast love (the *hesed* we talked about last Sunday), and compassion. He says, "I'm not asking you to be false to your nature as the Holy One by overlooking my sin. I'm just asking you to be true to your nature, since you have revealed yourself as unfailing love and great compassion." If that was clear to David, how much more clear is it to us who have seen God's nature revealed in Jesus and on the cross? When we pray, we do not start from the feeling of being condemned but from the knowledge that God loves us so much that he sent his Son.

2. Admit that sin is against God. God is the one you need to forgive you. The AA approach is right that we need to make restitution to the people we've wronged, but that doesn't get at the reality of sin. David says in verse 4, "Against you, you only have I sinned." We might say, "Wait a minute, didn't you sin against Uriah, and Bathsheba, and the baby, and the army, and the nation?" I think the Bible's answer would be: David hurt all those people, but his sin was against God. Sin in the Bible is not a naughty thing you do or something that hurts someone. Sin in the Bible is rebelling against God. Sin is hurting God.

So repentance in the Bible is not just a matter of saying, "God, I'm sorry I hurt my wife, I hurt my kids, I hurt my boss, I broke the law." What we forget today is that the one we really hurt most of all is God himself. Whatever harm we have caused to our neighbors or to ourselves, it is the God who loves us who suffers most of all. So repentance means saying, "God I'm sorry I hurt *you*. I'm sorry I turned against you, betrayed you, ignored you, in order to get what I want. Please take me back and restore our love relationship."

3. Admit that the problem is deep. Sin is not about one isolated incident. There are no isolated incidents. We never turn against God just once and never again. When David says, "I've been this way since I was born," he's not making an excuse. He's just admitting how massive the problem is. The truth about me is not that I was good until the moment I saw Bathsheba from the rooftop. The truth is that I have always been prone to put my desires ahead of my faithfulness to you. There never was a time in my life when I was not sinful, and it is ingrained in me. My mother was sinful, and her mother was sinful before her. This is not what you wanted, David says. You wanted faithfulness and wisdom even when I was in the womb, but instead you got unfaithfulness and foolishness.

In the Bible repentance goes beyond listing your wrong deeds. It means being broken-hearted about who you have become. I am not a good person. I am going to stop trying to fool myself. It is my nature to be selfish, to follow my appetites, and to try to run my own life. Recognizing that is what Christians have called "conviction of sin." You can't really become a Christian and be forgiven until you come to that point and your heart is broken. Psalm 51 says that what God really wants is not sacrifices or offerings. There is only one thing that will please God: "My sacrifice is this broken spirit. You will not scorn this crushed and broken heart" (verse 18, Jerusalem Bible).

4. Believe that God can create something new in you. What we need is not to change a bad habit. What we need is a new nature. David prays, "Create in me a clean heart, O God." That word "create" is the Hebrew word *bara*, which is the second word in the whole Bible—God *created*. The clean heart David wants is not something he can have just by cleaning up his act. It can only happen by an act of creation. God has to give him a new heart, a pure heart.

This is exactly what Jesus offers us—not just the forgiveness but also the promise of a new nature, a new heart. The faith that saves us is the faith to believe in this possibility. Jesus came to give us

a new life—eternal life, the life of the kingdom of God lived in the here and now. Paul said, “If anyone is *in Christ* the new creation has come: The old is gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17 TNIV). The new creation happens when you believe that what Jesus did on the cross reconciled you to God.

This is the message we need to hold on to all through Lent, because it is also the message of the cross: God wants to create a new and pure heart within you. He has done all that is required for that to happen. All he needs from you is the faith that God can do this and for you to offer him your old, wayward, broken heart.