

# Forgiveness

2 SAMUEL 11 & 12 | AUGUST 1, 2021

# ***FORGIVENESS***

2 SAMUEL 11:1-15 AND 2 SAMUEL 12:1-13

The story told in today's Scripture reading is not very nice.

We could have skipped over it, or read around it, or even avoided King David's history completely. But the Bible is very much about living in this world as it is, and continuing to believe that God is good, and sometimes people do things that cause terrible pain and suffering in another person's life.

We reflected on one of the best stories about David as a young man last week, the one where he rooted himself deep in his belief in God and fought a giant, Goliath. King David did a lot of good things and was mostly a good king; but he made some terrible mistakes, too, and this story about Bathsheba and Uriah is one of the worst. Everything that happens in our first Scripture reading is upsetting and repulsive: David's sexual exploitation of Bathsheba, the murder of Uriah, the mindless cooperation of Joab in the cold act of betraying a fellow soldier.

What might be more appalling, though, is the absence of any hesitation or divided will, a moral or ethical pause, before David simply begins taking what he wants and then casually covering up his mess. From the security of his royal house, David saw, he sent, he took, he lay...he effects his deadly will by ordering others to do what he wants them to, from bringing him Bathsheba to abandoning her husband on the front lines of a battle.

This is not a crime of passion; it is not a story about love or attraction overwhelming David's reason. David's actions in having Bathsheba brought to him are reasoned and routine, almost; deploying the people around him to accomplish his goal, putting them in positions where they have to do what he wants – that's what a king does. Let's be real, here: it's not as though Bathsheba could really say "no" to him, is it? And silence or a "yes" is not consent if you believe that "no" is an answer that's going to be ignored or get you hurt anyway. David's arrangement of Uriah's murder is just the same; all his actions point primarily to the calculations of power and not towards the recklessness we expect from wild passion.

The theological historian who wrote this story in 2nd Samuel offers only the facts here; no psychological motivations, no theological explanation, no God-imagined reason for David's actions. This is unusual; in other stories, David's actions – even when they're morally doubtful – get an explanation that ties what he's doing in with God's plan. But not this time.

It's a sad statement about humanity that this story about King David reads like a headline in the news today: powerful leader abuses his power to coerce a woman for sex, then further abuses his power to cover it up, resulting in the death of her husband. Could today's reading be King David's Watergate? Or the beginning of Israel's #MeToo? Will it inspire an inquiry that would see the king lose that power he's abused and be forced to acknowledge his terrible, criminal actions? Will David's kingship survive the scandal?

The most off-putting thing about this whole terrible series of events comes, I think, right at the end. David, after hearing everything Nathan the prophet has to say to him about what he, David, has done, all the terrible, ripple-effect consequences of his actions for himself and Bathsheba, for his family and even that unborn baby, David simply says, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan replies, "The Lord has taken away your sin. You will not die."

David is...forgiven. Just like that. For sexual coercion, for murder, for abusing his power to do those things and making others complicit in them, too, all those messengers and palace guards and Joab and even the enemy soldiers who ultimately did the deed.

If we were to read this story in the news today, about a powerful leader, say a politician or CEO, a doctor or anyone, really, abusing his or her power to hurt specific people, breaking the trust between themselves and all the people they lead...if we read that story in the news today, what would you feel? Outrage? Sorrow? Disgust? If you read the outcome – local minister talks to perpetrator and says he knows he's sinned and God forgives him – would that be enough? Or would you still be outraged? frustrated? demanding a de-throning and some proper justice for Bathsheba and Uriah?

It's revealing to note where God first enters into this narrative, where God is first mentioned...or gets his first verb, for those of you who were in Bible study earlier this summer. God is decidedly absent from all of David's actions and thoughts about Bathsheba and Uriah. It's not until Nathan comes to see David,

sent, we are told, by the Lord, that God becomes discernable in this situation that David has created. Nathan offers far more than a finger-wag and a scolding. God's displeasure with David, demonstrated by sending his prophet Nathan to him, is the first real bit of theological or ethical commentary on David's actions that we find.

The David who stands before Nathan, who has been present in the story so far, is a sharp contrast to the David once described as "a man after God's own heart." He's a far cry from the boy who was an underdog by every definition but bold and brave for God regardless. This David's primary concerns seem to be self-indulgence, keeping his crimes secret at all costs, and preserving his own power. So Nathan tells him a story about a rich man who takes what he wants from another, because he can.

This story, and the unethical behaviour of the rich man, cause David to erupt in outrage, full of disgust, demanding reparations and apologies and justice for the poor man who had his one ewe lamb taken from him. And yet, he's got a massive blind spot when it comes to his own behaviour. He does not judge his own actions and he can't even tell that he's failing to rightly judge his own actions, and no one, apart from Nathan, sent by God, seems able to break through to David. "You are the man!" Nathan says and break through he does, and we see a new David begin to emerge as his desire for power and control and self-indulgence fades away and he sees himself and what he's done in perfect, God-inspired clarity.

David has indeed sinned first against the Lord; but radiating out from that root cause, from that fundamental sinfulness, is all the suffering and hurt he inflicted on Bathsheba, Uriah, his family, his enemies, and his kingdom.

We aren't told anything here in 2 Samuel 12 about David's inner thought processes at this moment, as he recognises the horrible damage that his own sinfulness has done to himself and those around him. But we are given a glimpse in some of David's poetry, Psalm 51 which we read together today, and it is not an apology or an expression of regret for what he's done. It's a painful look at what happens when a sinful nature is left to grow, unchecked by the saving power of God. Sin touches every part of life; its consequences and effects are unavoidable. But sin is more than a matter of crime, guilt and punishment, of carefully weighed restitution and repayment, four lambs for the one beloved ewe lamb. Sin, David has discovered, deafens the sinner to gladness and causes physical pain, like broken bones. It is like being cast out of

God's presence, rejected and abandoned. Sin stops the enjoyment of the good news of God's salvation and even chokes off any willingness to follow God's law, rooting itself ever more deeply within the heart. The only solution is the creation of a new, clean heart within each human being, and of course, only God can create something like that. Only God can deal with our sin.

So David says, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan replies, "The Lord has taken away your sin. You will not die."

There are still consequences to what David has done; his family life breaks down horribly and all the terrible things Nathan tells him about do indeed take place. Like dropping someone's favorite coffee mug and apologising for it – all may be forgiven, but the mug is still in pieces on the floor. Sin has consequences that God's forgiveness does not get rid of – it's not a rewind button that allows us to re-record a better past; but it does give us a new understanding of it in the present, and a new way forward for the future.

God's forgiveness, God's mercy and the people and situations to which he extends it, has a history of...irritating his people, I guess?

Whether it's toward a whole city of enemies, like Nineveh in the book of Jonah, or toward an individual who's done something really terrible, something that can't be undone, like David has here...God's people have often struggled with the breadth of God's mercy. So if we are struggling with David receiving God's forgiveness with no obvious redress being made by David, with no loss of the kingly power that he wielded so coldly, with no punishment or restitution made to Bathsheba, no effort to make amends for his abuse of the power he has over his people...if we're struggling with that, then we are in the company of many of God's people who have struggled with who gets forgiven, with who experiences God's mercy and is made right with God.

Finding any gospel-good news in today's passage is challenging. But the painful and damaging story recounted in it for us is so relevant to our world today – this abuse of power and its blast radius of damage and brokenness, the struggle to allow forgiveness – finding God's good news and some hope to keep us going forward is more important than ever.

It's certainly good news that God forgives us in a way that heals us and re-creates our hearts so we can love and serve him better, in a way that frees us from continuing in David's Psalm 51 sinful experience.

It's also good news that God gives us this model of unconditional forgiveness, an expression of who God is and not what we deserve, because we can see how very different God's forgiveness is from the way we often forgive one another.

Imagine for a moment that someone has stolen your favourite pen.

It is certainly easier for us to offer forgiveness when the person who's hurt us expresses remorse and offers some sort of reparation. We can say, "I am willing to forgive you for stealing my pen, and after you give me my pen back, I'll forgive you." This is how forgiveness usually works in the world, don't you think? A kind of mish-mash of judgement, punishment, guilt and satisfaction.

In this understanding, forgiveness is a gift we give to someone, but it's a gift that has strings attached. The problem is that the strings we attach to the gift of forgiveness become the chains that bind us to the person who harmed us... and those are chains to which the person who hurt us holds the key.

We may set the conditions for granting our forgiveness – give me back my pen – but the person who harmed us decides whether or not the conditions are going to be met; our pen-thief can always say "no." We are at an impasse, bound together by mutual resentment and stuck, hurting and angry on both sides. Even if the pen is returned, the hurt, the embarrassment, the guilt, the self-righteousness, may well remain; and that's a far cry from the healing and renewal that God's forgiveness shows us is possible.

Unconditional forgiveness, shaped by our own experience of how God forgives us, is a gift without any strings attached, a gift we can both offer and receive from each other. This kind of forgiveness frees the one who inflicted the harm from the weight of what the person they hurt may demand in order to grant forgiveness. But it also frees the one who forgives.

The one who offers forgiveness as a gift of grace is immediately untethered from the yoke that bound him or her to the person who caused the harm. When we forgive, we are free to move on in life, to grow, to be healed. When we forgive, we slip the yoke, and our future is unshackled from our past. That's what God is teaching us to do throughout Scripture and in the living examples of our own lives, too.

The quality, the nature, of God's forgiveness is a vital part of the story that God is telling the world about himself. And it's absolutely consistent with everything else we know about who God is. God seeks to save, to heal and to transform; God only judges – as he does through Nathan's words to David – where God seeks to save. Like God's judgement and God's salvation, God's forgiveness is about who God is, not about who we are. God's forgiveness of David opens David up to the possibility of changing who he is; to the creation of a clean, new heart, infused with God's mercy and forgiveness rather than submerged in sin.

That's what God's forgiveness does – it leads to change: to healing, to renewal, to new life. That's what happens for David. We hope it happened for Bathsheba, too. And that's what could happen for us, and our world, too, as we're able to forgive others as God forgives us. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Tutu, Desmond, et al. The book of forgiving: The fourfold path for healing ourselves and our world. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014.