



DAVID AND THE GOOD LIFE | REPAIR

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I enjoy the writings of the English author Francis Spufford, who wrote a book entitled *Unapologetic*. It is a helpful and humorous, as well as unapologetic, account for why Christianity, despite everything, still makes a lot of sense. He dedicates an entire chapter to the topic of sin, but he prefers not to use that word because he seems to think that it has lost its resonance. When modern people hear the word 'sin,' we tend to think of naughty pleasure, like a decadent dessert or sinful chocolate. He prefers to define sin as "the human potential to mess things up." I have cleaned up the language a little bit, but this is what he writes,

"You can get quite a long way through an adult life without having to acknowledge your own personal propensity to [mess things up]; maybe even all the way through, if you're someone with a very high threshold of obliviousness...But for most of us the point eventually arrives when, at least for an hour or a day or a season, we find we have to take notice of our [human potential to mess things up] (as I think I'd better call it).

Our appointment with realization often comes at one of the classic moments of adult failure: when a marriage ends, when a career stalls or crumbles, when a relationship fades away with a child seen only on Saturdays, when the supposedly recreational coke habit turns out to be exercising veto powers over every other hope and dream. It need not be dramatic, though. It can equally well just be the drifting into place of one more pleasant, indistinguishable little atom of wasted time, one more morning like all the others, which quietly disclose you to yourself...

You notice that you're thirty-nine and that the way you're living bears scarcely any resemblance to what you think you've always wanted; yet you got here by choice, by a long series of choices for things which, at any one moment, temporarily outbid the things you say you wanted most...

You glimpse an unflattering vision of yourself as a being whose wants make no sense, don't harmonize: whose desires, deep down, are discordantly arranged... You're equipped, you realize, for farce (or even tragedy) more than you are for happy endings. The [human potential to mess things up] dawns on you. You have, indeed, messed things up. Of course you have. You're human."

We're in the midst of a series in which we are considering the question: "What is the good life?" through a close reading of the David story in 1 and 2 Samuel. Today, we are painfully reminded of the fact that the biggest obstacle to living the good life is not other people. It's not our circumstances. The biggest obstacle to living the good life is our very own selves. No matter what we do, no matter where we go, we bring our sin with us—our human potential to mess things up. It's true that we are naturally equipped far more for farce or for tragedy than for happy endings.

If we want to discover the good life, we need to take a hard look at ourselves and come to terms with our potential for ruin and our desperate need for both redemption and repair. From the outset, I said that David is not presented to us in the Scriptures as a moral exemplar for us to emulate. If I told you to go out there and be like David, you would run your life into the ground. And now we see why.

Today we turn to a notorious low point in David's life. David takes another man's wife. He tries to cover it up. Then in the end, he arranges for her husband to be killed. David's life spirals out of control, and it slips deeper and deeper into the abyss. But God, in his grace, sends a prophet. He sends a pastor to confront David in his sin, not to condemn him, but to redeem him.

As we turn to 2 Samuel 11 and 12, I'd like us to see what we can learn about three things: *ruin*, *redemption*, and *repair*. If you'd like, let me invite you to open up a Bible to 2 Samuel 11 and 12. I will be referring to 2 Samuel 11, but I will only be reading from 2 Samuel 12. I'll be reading verses 1-13.

¹And the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had very many flocks and herds, ³but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." ⁵Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, ⁶and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

⁷Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. ⁸And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. ⁹Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' ¹¹Thus says the Lord, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. ¹²For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.'" ¹³David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die."

This is God's word. It's trustworthy, and it's true, and it's given to us in love.

Ruin

First, let's consider ruin. There are two names that are forever linked to David. One is Goliath and the other is Bathsheba. Goliath is associated with David's greatest victory. Bathsheba is associated with David's greatest sin. As with Goliath, even people who have never read the Bible before know something about David and Bathsheba. This episode represents David's "#MeToo moment," and the narrator describes it all with sharp disapproval. Despite David's great track record of relying upon God in all things, at this stage in his life, David grows self-satisfied and complacent, which opens him up to all kinds of spiritual dangers. Here we see David's sinking into three ever more destructive patterns of thought and behavior. First *adultery*, then *deception*, and then *thirdly*, murder.

Adultery

Most commentators will point out the repeated use of the word "send" in 2 Samuel 11. You can see it if you have that chapter open before you. First of all, rather than leading the army himself, David *sends* his commander Joab to war while he remains at home. Then one day after getting up after his afternoon nap, David takes a walk on the roof of his palace and from there he spies a beautiful young woman while she's bathing. He *sends* messengers to inquire about her. Even when he learns that Bathsheba is a generation younger than he, and married to Uriah the Hittite, one of his most loyal men, he does not suppress his desire. Instead, he *sends* messengers and takes Bathsheba for himself, and then he discards her and *sends* her back home. But some time passes and now Bathsheba *sends* word to David that she is pregnant.

Deceit

Therefore adultery gives way to deceit. David tries to find a way to cover up what he's done. Now he sends for Uriah. He brings him back from the battlefield and sends him home for a little R&R in the hopes that Uriah will spend some time with his wife and therefore take responsibility for the child that is to be born. But Uriah has far too much honor to enjoy a visit with his wife while his men are still roughing it out there on the battlefield. He refuses to go home even when the king insists upon it.

Murder

David hits a new low as deceit turns to murder. He sinks to a low that we did not even think was possible for a man such as he. Now David sends word to Joab, the commander, to purposely put Uriah in harm's way. And then to pull back the troops just when the fighting is most intense, leaving him exposed and almost certainly in a position to die. That is precisely what happens. The narrator concludes the passage by telling us that David sends one more time for Bathsheba upon the death of Uriah and then she became his wife. But the narrator wants us to understand in no uncertain terms in verse 27, that the thing that David had done, displeases the Lord. We might well wonder, how could David have been capable of such a thing, someone who is described as a man after God's own heart?

We might say, "Thank God, I'm not like David. I would never do anything like that. I'm not capable of anything like that." But if you think that you would be fooling yourself because then you have forgotten *the human potential to mess things up*. The Scottish pastor Robert Murray M'Cheyne once said,

“The seeds of every sin known to man are in my heart, and perhaps all the more dangerously that I do not see them.”

What is he saying? He’s not saying that he’s guilty of every sin known to man, but rather, he’s saying that the seeds of every sin lie within his heart. Some of those seeds may not have been watered or cultivated in a particular way, but if the circumstances of life were just a little bit different, some of those seeds very well could sprout up. The potential is all there. And the seeds that can do the most damage in any of our lives, are the ones that we can’t see. That is why we need others to speak the truth into our lives, to help us see what we can’t see. That is what God does for David.

Redemption

This episode, perhaps more than any other shows us that no matter how deep our sin, God’s grace is deeper still. God’s grace not only precedes, but enables our repentance. God’s grace not only comes first, but it makes repentance possible. After all of David’s scheming and sending, after all of his lying and deceiving, after all of his attempts to manipulate and to manage the situation, the word “send” appears one more time at the very beginning of chapter 12. But this time, it is not David who is sending. It is God who sends. In verse 1, God sends Nathan the prophet to David, and he sends him not to condemn him, but to redeem him. He sends Nathan, the prophet, David’s pastor, to confront his sin and to lead him to repentance so that he might redeem him.

The way in which Nathan does so provides us with what you might call a masterclass in the power of a good sermon. Nathan, in fact, gives a little sermon, although David doesn’t even realize that’s what is happening at first. Nathan tells the story of two men: one rich and the other poor. But David interprets the story as a narrative of true crime. In this story, the poor man had only one little lamb which he had raised as a daughter, but when the rich man throws a dinner party, rather than taking one of the many lambs from his own flock, the rich man cruelly takes this poor man’s little pet lamb and serves it up as the main course for his guests. David becomes personally involved in the story. He knows that the proper penalty for the theft of a lamb is to pay it back four times over. But David utterly condemns the man and says this man deserves to die. This man deserves to die for this heartless act because he shows no pity.

Look at Nathan’s skill as a pastor. Because David has become so personally involved in the story, all Nathan has to say now is, “You are the man!” I would suggest that that is what we all need to hear. Many of us when we hear a sermon immediately start thinking of someone else. “I know who really needs to hear this right now. I know someone for whom this is a real problem. I’m going to send them this sermon as soon as this service is over.” Don’t get me wrong. There’s nothing wrong with sending a sermon to someone as long as we remember, first and foremost, that the gospel is never for somebody else. The gospel is always for you. It is always for me. It’s always for us. You are the woman! You are the man! It’s not for somebody else. It’s intended for you.

Nathan goes on to explain that David was the king. God had given him everything he could have ever wanted. And he would have given him even more if he had only

asked. If the rich man who ate that pet lamb deserved to die according to David's own words, then what did David deserve for what he had done with his adultery and his deception and his murder? So God asks the underlying question in verse 9, "Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight?" Those words should have rang a bell for David. They should have sounded familiar. They should have made him rather nervous because God had said something very similar to Saul, the first king of Israel, who refused to listen to the words of a prophet, the prophet Samuel. As result 1 Samuel 15 tells us that the Lord says to him, "Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, the Lord has rejected you, as the king of Israel."

We might well wonder why doesn't David meet a similar fate when he has done something far worse than Saul ever did? This is a source of confusion for a lot of people. If you read through 1 and 2 Samuel, it seems like David's sins are far more serious, far more destructive than Saul sins, which at the end of the day, were really sins related to the worship of God. And yet, though David's sins seem far worse, Saul is rejected as king, but God upholds his promise to establish David's throne forever. So what gives? It's true that David still will have to bear the natural consequences of his actions. The Lord warns him that as a result of his poor choices, a sword of conflict will be introduced into his life. And his house, the house of David, will be ripped apart by civil war. But why does Saul lose his kingship for his relatively minor offenses when David is able to keep his kingship despite his major offenses? Does that suggest that God is arbitrary? Capricious? That he simply picks his favorites? No, that's not it. We need to look deeper.

What was the difference between Saul and David? Or what was the difference between Judas and Peter in the New Testament? Judas betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Peter denies ever knowing Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times. But in the end, Judas kills himself, and Peter is restored. What's the difference? What's the difference between Peter and Judas, or the difference between Saul and David? How do you know which one you are? The difference does not lie in sin. The difference lies in repentance. Everybody sins, but not everyone repents.

Repair

Given the human potential to mess things up, repentance is the key to the good life. And repentance is the only way to repair. What does it mean to repent? We often associate the word repentance with a "feeling" word. We think it's a feeling word. We're supposed to feel really bad about the things that we've done, but repentance is not primarily a feeling word. It's a thinking word. In Greek it literally means to change your mind. It means to do a U-turn in your thinking. You're headed in one direction, you need to pull a 180 and head in the opposite direction. It means to revise your strategy for life. To repent means that you have been living as if you are the center of the universe, and you need to change your thinking and realize that God is at the center of the universe. You need to *dethrone* yourself and *enthroned* God.

What does that look like in practice? What does it really mean to repent? Out of an awareness of God's grace and mercy, you acknowledge your fault. You admit what it is that you've done wrong, and then you receive God's forgiveness. With every intention of pursuing new obedience, you seek to make amends, to make things right, and you take proactive steps to ensure that whatever you've done in the past will not be

repeated again. But rather than wallowing in guilt and shame, you get back up, and you believe again. That's what it means to live a life of repentance and faith. That's what David models for us here. Verse 13, summarizes David's response he says, simply, "I have sinned against the Lord." As Eugene Peterson says, "That is a sentence filled with hope because it is a sentence filled with God."

That's a very short summary of what David says, but Psalm 51 provides us with more color. Psalm 51 is introduced as a Psalm of David, which he wrote when Nathan came to him after he had slept with Bathsheba. Psalm 51 provides us with a much deeper, richer exposition of what it means to repent. So what does David do?

First of all, he appeals to God's mercy. The Psalm begins in verse 1 by saying,

¹Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

Then secondly, he acknowledges his fault. In verse 4, he says,

⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned

Timeout. Hold on. Did you hear what he just said? "Against you, you only, have I sinned." How could David possibly say that? Think of how many people David has hurt in this situation? How can he say "against you, you only have I sinned?" David is not diminishing the harm that he's caused to Bathsheba. He is not denying the evil that he has committed against Uriah. But what David recognizes is that all of our sins are ultimately an offense against God because underneath and behind everything we have done, it's *his* authority that we have violated. It's *his* laws that we've broken. It's *his* design for human life and for the human world that we've ruined. It's *his* love that we've scorned. It's *his* heart that we've broken, and therefore ultimately, it is against the Lord whom we have sinned.

He appeals to God's mercy. He acknowledges his fault. But then he asks for renewal and repair. Beginning in verse 10, he famously says,

¹⁰Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
¹¹Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Then in the end, Nathan tells us in verse 13 of our passage today, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die." That's the gospel. Despite who you are, despite what you have done, the Lord has put away your sin, you shall not die.

Here's what I want you to see. Our repentance has not earned God's forgiveness. But rather, the promise of God's forgiveness is what makes repentance possible in the first

place. That's the difference between what you might call religion on the one hand and the gospel on the other. Consider these three points.

A religious person might repent. If you're a religious person, you repent not because you're sorry for the sin, but because you're sorry that you got caught. You repent because you want to avoid the consequences of your actions. You want to *avoid* punishment. But a Christian repents not because they're sorry for being caught, but rather because they're sorry for the sin itself. You're sorry for grieving God and for breaking his heart.

Secondly, a religious person might repent, but it easily turns into an attempt to try to atone for your sin yourself. You think, "If I am sorry enough or remorseful enough, or if I beat myself up enough and feel really bad about what's happened, then I deserve to be forgiven." So a religious person thinks that they can *earn* forgiveness through their remorse. But a Christian asks the question, "What would ever be enough?" We can never save ourselves through our depth of contrition. You cannot earn your forgiveness, you can only receive it.

Thirdly, a religious person might repent, but only if absolutely necessary and often under extreme duress. Why is that? Because a religious person *bases their whole identity on their goodness*. And if being good is central to who you are, then it's far too threatening to admit your mistakes. It's far too easy to minimize the things that you've done or to try to explain them away. It's far too traumatic to take a hard look at yourself in the mirror and to face up to who you are or what you've done. But a Christian knows that God is like the waiting Father, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, who stands ready to forgive at a moment's notice with arms wide open before you even have a chance to say, "I'm sorry."

Grace makes it safe for us to look in the mirror. We know that because God stands ready to forgive us, there's nothing to fear. We can admit our weaknesses, our shortcomings, our failures, our moral lapses, knowing that there is not now nor will there ever be any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. There's no punishment, there's no condemnation because Jesus already bore it. Jesus already paid it all. His grace comes first. His grace not only precedes but enables our repentance.

That's why Martin Luther famously said "All of life is repentance." Do you realize that when Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses on the door in Wittenberg, kickstarting the Reformation, this was the very first thesis. Thesis No. 1: When the Lord Jesus said, repent, he intended that every believer should live a life of repentance. "All of life is one of repentance." At first, that might sound rather negative, as if we don't ever make any progress in the Christian life, but that's not what Luther is saying. He's saying that *the way* in which we make progress as Christians is *through* repentance. We live a life of repentance and faith.

What does it mean to be a mature Christian? A mature Christian is not someone who is perfect. A mature Christian is not someone who never makes mistakes. No, a mature Christian is not someone who makes *less and less mistakes*, but rather someone who admits them *more and more*, because grace makes it safe to look deep into our own hearts, and to acknowledge our shortcomings and our failures. We're not afraid to admit them. That's what unlocks the joy. The more you understand God's grace, the more you admit your sin. The more you put down your defenses and get rid of your self denials, the more his grace becomes electrifying.

If you take an honest look at yourselves, you might be shocked and surprised by the things that you see lurking within the recesses of your own heart, but God is never shocked. He's never surprised. With every sin you confess, with every attempt to turn away from all known sin and towards God in faith, you experience how much deeper his grace runs than you would ever thought before. His grace not only proceeds but it enables our repentance.

God sent Nathan to David, but what about us? We don't have a Nathan to confront us and to convict us of our sin and to lead us to repentance, but we do have something better. After all of our scheming, after all of our lying and deceiving, after all of our attempts to manipulate and to manage, God shows us that he is the one who is ultimately in control. And in his providential love and care for us, he sends. He doesn't send Nathan. He sends Jesus. Jesus is repeatedly referred to in the Gospel of John as the "sent one," the one sent by the Father. But with this important difference. Nathan exposes David by saying, "You are the man!" David stands condemned by his own words. He himself said, "This man deserves to die." "You are the man!"

Do you realize that something very similar was said to Jesus when he stood falsely condemned before Pontius Pilate. Pontius Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent. Even though he knew that he hadn't done anything deserving death, Pontius Pilate takes water, and he washes his hands in front of the crowd, falsely claiming, "I'm innocent of this man's blood." Then he mocks Jesus by dressing him up as a false king in a crown of thorns and a purple robe, and he presents him to the crowd, handing him over to be crucified. You know what he says? He says, "Behold the man!"

Consider this contrast: Through the gospel, God confronts us with our sin. He says, "You are the woman! You are the man!" The gospel isn't about somebody else. It's about you. And yet at the very same time, just as he tells you that you are guilty, and you have no one else to blame, just as you hear those words, convicting you, "You are the man," at the very same time you hear these words reassuring your heart, "Behold, the man, Jesus," who willingly steps forward to bear your guilt, and to bear your shame, to die in your place, on the cross.

The opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is indifference. If God didn't care, he would do nothing. But God, out of his love for you, makes the first move. He comes to you. He comes to me in order to confront us, to convict us of our sin, not to condemn us, but to redeem us. John 3:17, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." His grace comes first. His grace not only proceeds but enables our repentance. His grace makes it safe to repent, and now we can live a life of repentance and faith. That is the key to the good life.

Let me pray for us.

Now that we admit to you today, our human potential to mess things up. We pray that as you sent Nathan to David, so you would send Jesus to us to confront us, to convict us of our sin, to expose our guilt, not to condemn us, but to redeem us, not to ruin us, but to repair us. Help us Father to acknowledge our fault, to admit our wrongs because we are so aware of your grace and mercy. Help us to turn from all known sin to you in faith so that we might get up and believe again and live as your people. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.