
For the choir director. A psalm by David.

When Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba.

*¹Be gracious to me, God,
according to your mercy.*

*Erase my acts of rebellion
according to the greatness of your compassion.*

*²Scrub me clean from my guilt.
Purify me from my sin.*

The story of David is a story about the snowballing effect of sin. It all started when the season of war came, but King David refrained from his duty of leading the army out to war. He had neglected his office. He had let his people down. And destruction flowed from this seemingly insignificant detail. In his laziness, he saw a woman bathing on her roof. She belonged to another man, but that was not going to keep the king from getting what he wanted. She was brought to him, he slept with her, and she became pregnant with his child. Of course, now he had to cover this sin up. He brought her husband, Uriah, home from war. Uriah was one of David's most fierce warriors and a Gentile to boot. David coaxed him to go home. Then they could say the baby was his and not David's. But Uriah did not want to enjoy time with his wife while his brothers in arms were still sleeping in the streets. David tried harder, this time getting Uriah drunk. But even under the influence, Uriah would not betray his men. David was desperate. He ordered his general to set Uriah up to die on the battlefield. There Uriah perished. We read all this, then we think about the title often given to David: A man after God's own heart. And it sounds kind of rich. How could David do such a thing? How could this man after God's own heart allow his sin to snowball to the point of destroying a family?

David had sinned. He had broken God's law in so many different directions. Worst of all, though, was that he was impenitent. It's one thing to do all these things and come to the realization of sin and say, "God, have mercy!" It's another thing to try and justify adultery, lies, and murder. How did David justify all this in his mind? Did he believe his crown gave him the hand of the wife of one of his loyal soldiers? Did he excuse the lies and murder his friend with an ends-justify-the-means argument that one man must die to protect the nation from scandal? Maybe David felt trapped, but no matter the excuse, David carried no sorrow for the things he had done.

David may have thought he had gotten away with it until God sent his prophet Nathan to confront David. But Nathan didn't come before the throne guns-a-blazing. He came with tact. He told David a story of a poor man who had a beloved pet sheep and a rich man who was too greedy to sacrifice his own sheep. The rich man took the poor man's sheep, killed it, cooked it up, and served it to his guests. Of course, this enraged David. He wanted to know the rich man's name so he could punish him for picking on his poor neighbor. But then Nathan ripped the rug out from under him: "You are the man."

This was a gut punch. This was a knife stabbed right into David's heart, and he didn't think anyone else knew about his sins. But from that knife wound flowed real sorrow. David confessed his sin, not making any excuse or passing off any blame. Then he heard the consequence of his sin. His newborn son would die. David sat in sorrow for many days, praying that the Lord would show mercy and spare his child. But when word came

that his son had fallen asleep in the Lord, David got up, done with his pleading, to worship. And David speaks some of the most beautiful words about the hope of the resurrection: “I will go to him, but he will not return to me.” David knew he was forgiven. He knew heaven was his. Repentance is powerful. It’s the work of the Spirit to call sinners to repentance and move them to worship.

As we spend this Lenten season journeying to cross and tomb with Jesus, great David’s greater son, we will meditate on Psalm 51, a psalm from a repentant sinner. It’s our prayer that the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts tonight lead us to realize our need for repentance.

Do you ever notice the heading in the psalms? Some have them and others don’t. Some headings share the author of the psalm. Others show musical instructions or the occasion it was written for. This psalm has the heading: “For the choir director. A psalm by David. When Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba.” When Nathan found David, David’s first move was not to confess. He saw no need to plead for forgiveness or receive God’s grace. He thought he had gotten away with it. He thought no one had noticed.

When people get into a predicament because of sin, it becomes the norm to say, “I got myself into this mess. Now I better get myself out of it.” But refusal to repent and trying to cover your sins up inevitably leads to more sins. And usually, those sins become more and more destructive. What’s worst of all is that refusal to repent leads to a rejection of God’s grace and an eventual fall from faith.

David is far from alone in using this cover up tactic. We know lying makes things worse. That’s what our parents try to teach us throughout our childhoods. But when we sin, we still go back to that mantra: “I got myself into this mess. Now I better get myself out of it.” That sin is covered up by a lie. But when does that lie need to be covered by another lie? And when do we have to slap a lie on top of that one? At what point do the lies pile up so high that our life itself is a lie? That’s when we refuse to look God in the eyes, much like David probably didn’t want to look the general he ordered to have Uriah killed in the eyes. Impenitence leads to avoiding God like the plague, in fear that judgment and destruction are right around the corner. Then comes a loss of faith altogether.

David did not think anyone had noticed, but God had. No sin gets past him. There are no trespasses that God does not address. Through the prophet, God made sure David knew that he could not just ignore or excuse his sins. His refusal to repent put him on the road to hell.

The Lord does the same for us. He does not leave us to just wonder if we got away with our sins. He uses our conscience to pierce our sinful hearts. He uses the deaths of loved ones and the terrors of life to show us that we cannot justify ourselves alone. We are guilty. And there is nothing in this world that can change that.

“You are the man.” Those were the words David heard in that message which called him to the carpet for what he had done. God points his finger at us too: “You are the man.” “You are the woman.” And because we cannot cover up our sins, these words ring in our ears.

After Nathan’s confrontation with David, David is led by the Holy Spirit to repentance. In the psalm before us this evening, David is pleading for forgiveness. And it’s not attached to some promise that he will improve himself. It’s focused completely on God’s grace. David says, “Be gracious to me, God, according to your mercy. Erase my acts of rebellion according to the greatness of your compassion. Scrub me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin.”

David speaks of the promises of God to God, because he knows the Lord’s faithfulness to his own word. David knew the promise God had made to send a Savior through Eve’s offspring. He knew how throughout Israel’s history, God had forgiven them their guilt again and again. Though he was a sinner, David knew the Lord’s plans for a Redeemer still stood. His hope was renewed. He had confidence in God’s mercy.

Forgiveness. Cleansing. Yes, David faced earthly consequences for his sins. But his eternal slate was wiped clean. And as he stood at the news of his son's death, his mind was on God's grace. He deserved much less. He deserved hell. Yet, God had given his son the glory of heaven. David showed renewed faith in this prayer. In this psalm David does not ask for God to change his circumstances of life. He asks God to change his heart.

Of course, God is not slow to do exactly that. He cleansed David in the sacrifices David made at the temple in worship following his son's death. No, the blood of animals would not actually cover his sins. These would be a foreshadowing of the great sacrifice to come, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

This prayer of repentance by David is a prayer that can flow from our mouths with the same meaning. But we don't need the bloody sacrifices to remind us of our sin and God's grace. Instead, we have the cross. It is this season of Lent that we spend time thinking about Jesus' passion, his suffering. And this suffering happened not only at the cross. In order to live the perfect life and sacrifice that life for the world, Jesus had to deny himself all the sinful pleasures of the world. Never did he give into temptation, and he did so that we can share in his glory.

In worship we receive God's grace. We receive it as the word of God calls us to account for sin then announces that the debts had graciously been paid. We receive it in the baptism, as God works repentance in sorrow over sin and a trust in Christ for forgiveness. And we receive it in the sacrament of the altar, as God brings sinners with their heads hanging to the rail and sends them away with their heads held high in renewal.

It is a gracious gift of God that we realize our need for repentance. Though our sins may be different than David's, our need for repentance is the same. But only when God shows us how deep our need is for repentance do we truly grasp is grace, mercy, and love for us in Christ. Amen.