

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Grieving Truth and Liberating Confession
2 Samuel 12
August 1, 2021

Oh snap.

That's what the kids say. That's what the kids would say if they'd been in the room when Nathan tells David, "You are the Man." Oh snap, can you believe what he just said?

Let's back up just a little bit.

David's gotten away with it. With everything.

The lust, the adultery, the betrayal, using other people as objects. He's gotten away with it.

The scheming, the murder to cover up his adultery. He's gotten away with it all.

The husband is dead.

His friends are complicit.

The woman is now his wife.

The child born to her would now be under his roof.

What do you do when you've gotten away with it? Celebrate, I guess. I guess you congratulate yourself on what you've done and that you've managed to outsmart or outmaneuver everyone into either ignorance or silent complicity. Or, you stew in it, and although you know you've gotten away with it, you still sit with the knowledge. Your conscience won't let it go, this thing you've done. Everyone else may not know, but you know. Everyone else may look the other way, but you close your eyes and see it all again. Everyone else may be silent, but the voice in your head whispers, whispers when all is quiet.

Some people turn to God in their guilt and shame seeking forgiveness and restoration and wholeness. Others run away from God as far as they can get. Others feel painfully caught in the middle of who they wanted to be and who they know themselves to have become. Between who other people think they are and who they think themselves to be. Sin is a dreadful thing.

David thought he'd gotten away with it, but the thing David had done displeased the Lord.

I suppose the Lord could have had several possible reactions to divine displeasure. The Lord could have destroyed David, ended his monarchy, ended his life, and crushed him for his iniquity. That would be the Lord of judgment, which we know God is. God is a God of righteous judgment.

Or the Lord could have reassured David that he is still loved and God could have affirmed him for all the good he had done and could still do. That would be the act of the Lord of grace, which we know God is. God is God of abundant grace.

What's a righteous, gracious God to do with someone like David or like you or me? Should God uphold holy righteousness and crush all sinners with the fist of judgment? Or should God extend divine grace and affirm all human nature with the open hand of benevolence?

The image on the front cover of the worship guide invites us to pray to and with a God who is both righteous and gracious. And I believe this is the God we need, and the God we have. The icon of *Christ Pantocrator* dates back to the 6th century. It's the oldest known existing icon of this kind of image of Christ. *Pantocrator* means Almighty. Christ Almighty. It was and still is in St. Catherine's Monastery at the base of Mt. Sinai in Egypt. In Christ's left hand, our right, he holds a thick, heavy book of the Gospels. Christ's right hand forms the shape of a blessing.

This particular icon is famous and powerful for the face of Christ. The left side of his face is stern. You might notice the cocked eyebrow, the upturned lip, the darkened cheekbones and neck. All these give the viewer the impression of Christ in judgment, Christ who sees our sin. He knows. His righteous judgment finds each of us irrevocably wanting in our holiness. The book he holds may be the four Gospels, but somewhere in the margins is written Romans 3.23, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

The things David had done displeased the Lord. It fell to David's spiritual advisor Nathan to bring David to repentance. So, he tells a story about a rich man with many sheep who takes the one little ewe lamb of a poor man and kills it and feeds it to a traveler who happens to be passing through. David, not exactly the most self-aware, erupts in judgment. Not in my kingdom this kind of thing will be allowed! 'He deserves to die. But at least he should repay it fourfold.'

If Nathan had hoped David would make the connection himself for himself... if Nathan had hoped he wouldn't have to be the one to say the obvious thing out loud, he was disappointed. The silence must have been awkward, to say the least. Nathan's handshakes like young lawyer Tom Cruise in a *Few Good Men* trying to decide how far he should take the interrogation with 4-star general Jack Nicholson on the stand.

How did Nathan deliver the next line? Was it a shout of prophetic pronouncement? My translation has an exclamation point there in verse 7. Nathan points the finger and accuses the guilty. But the more time I spend with this story, the less I can hear it that way. That way is satisfying for all the Nathan's in the world and all of us who insert ourselves proudly as Nathan to everyone else's David. I read it as grief now. Grief over what has transpired and what's become of this man's life. Grief over his own complicity in failing to confront David over all these months. Grief over this very moment when Nathan has given David everything he needs to make the connection, and he still doesn't. I hear it now as whispered through welling eyes, "David, you're the man." I see nothing in the stories of Nathan and David that suggests that Nathan was this blowhard prophetic declarer of all things Godly. Nathan strikes me as a person who loves his king, his friend, loves his nation, and loves God. And yet is willing even in all that love to speak truth. This is pain, "David, you are the man." Oh snap. Oh no.

You had everything you could have ever wanted, but it wasn't enough. So, you took, you killed, and you will suffer, you and your house will suffer. The way of violence begets violence. The way of sin begets judgment.

I think all of Israel's history, not to mention David's soul, hung in the balance in what happens next. We have to remember that as king he is independently sovereign. There's no checks and balances in Israel. He is prophet, priest, and king. He is church and state. He is judge and jury. There's literally no one left to judge him or hold him accountable. If he responds, "I didn't do that" no one can say anything and he gets away with it. If he says, "How dare you" and pins Nathan to the wall with a spear, no one can stop him. He can deny, he can lash out.

These are real options that people take all the time when confronted with their sin. They deny, "I didn't do that". They obfuscate, "Who are you to accuse me?" They diminish, "It's not all that bad." They justify, "Well, I had to do this because of that reason."

All these are real options for anyone, especially for the king of Israel. They are all ways to get away with it, but they are not ways to heal the wound inside.

St. Augustine characterizes sin as the state of being *incurvatus in se*, to be caved in on oneself, or bent. David has been caved in, indifferent or oblivious to the damage he produced all around himself. When a person is caved in a person is incapable of praise, because worship is the most centrifugal act possible. Worship moves us outward from ourselves. Sin collapses us in on ourselves. It's the difference between being a star radiating light and warmth and being a black hole that draws everything into its gravitational force and crushes it.

It all hangs in the balance for Israel and for David's soul. The courage of his friend to confront him, don't overlook how important that is in our lives, no matter which pair of shoes we are wearing. Nathan's courage gives David enough light to be able to see and be able to bring to light the dark truth about himself. And so, David responds, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Commentator Robert Barron rightly says, "It is to David's infinite credit that upon hearing the charge and sentence, he immediately admits his guilt." Barron goes on to say that God is a God of noncompetitive transcendence. Interesting phrase. And so, when David confesses his sin, saying I have sinned against the Lord, it is not by way of denying the pain he has done to everyone else, it is a way of acknowledging the totality of it. Barron says, "Since God is the ground of being and the unconditional act of goodness itself, God is in fact sinned against in every sin (*II Samuel*, 112)." I have sinned against the Lord," isn't to deny the sin and pain toward all the other people we damage nor our own selves or all creation. It is to recognize that in all creation and woven in every breath in every relationship, God is. To sin against the Lord is to sin against the Lord who is in all and who is all.

It all hung in the balance in David's response---all of Israel and his own soul.

Eugene Peterson says, "'I have sinned against the Lord' is full of hope because it's full of God. Only when we recognize and confess our sin are we in a position to recognize and respond to the God who forgives our sin." Confession is the beginning of liberation.

Only when we have confessed our sin are we capable of seeing God in the left side of the image of Christ Pantocrator. The image of grace. The eye is softer, the expression is gentler. This is no God of cheap grace. This is a God of righteous grace, just the God in whose image we are made, the God who prays in and through us, and the God who calls us onward in the way, the truth, and the life.

May we walk in the footsteps of this grace.

In God truth and grace are not at war against one another. God is One. Truth and grace are made flesh in Jesus Christ and made known by the Holy Spirit. This is God Almighty, in whom we live, before whom we are revealed, to whom we confess, and by whom we are set free from the heavy weights that collapse us in on ourselves. We are set free to live, to love, to worship and give thanks to the Lord and to bless our neighbors. This is our purpose and this is the gift we have been given.

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