

Twin Griefs - 2 Samuel 12

Date: 12 May 2024, 6th Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Everlasting Kingdom - 2 Samuel

Texts: 2 Samuel 12, Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God,
 according to your unfailing love;
 according to your great compassion
 blot out my transgressions.
 Wash away all my iniquity
 and cleanse me from my sin.

We've been following the story of David in the books of Samuel. Last week we came to the great turning point of the story, David's affair with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah, her husband, to cover this up. We might not commit murder like David, but we see in David's story patterns of temptation and transgression that we all face. Chapter 11 ended with David seeming to have literally gotten away with murder, except that we read, "But the thing David had done was evil in the Lord's eyes." As we come to part 2 of this episode in chapter 12, the question is what will God do? What will happen to David?

Our text today raises one of the great paradoxes in human life. We want both justice and mercy. We want justice for victims. We see that in our news feeds every day. But if we're the ones in the wrong we want mercy. I've quoted musician Nick Cave on this before, but he nails it on the head.

Mercy is a value that should be at the heart of any functioning and tolerant society. Mercy ultimately acknowledges that we are all imperfect and in doing so allows us the oxygen to breathe — to feel protected within a society, through our mutual fallibility. Without mercy a society loses its soul, and devours itself.¹

And yet doesn't mercy undermine justice? Doesn't it give the perpetrator a free pass? Don't we also want people who have done the wrong thing to change their behaviour? How can we have real justice and at the same time real mercy that allows people the space for real change and transformation? It's with these questions in mind that we turn to our text this morning.

You are the Man (1-13)

"The LORD sent Nathan to David." How will this encounter go? Confronting a king who has just arranged a murder to cover up his peccadillo is a risky business for a prophet. What can Nathan possibly say to get David to fess up? He tells David a story. Again we see the superb literary craft of Samuel. "Send" was the key verb in chapter 11, with David sending people all over the place to do his bidding. Now God "sends" Nathan with this story.

¹ <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/what-is-mercy-for-you/>

There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. **2** The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, **3** but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

4 'Now a traveller came to the rich man, but it seemed a pity to him to take one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveller who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.'

It's clear the rich man is David and the poor man Uriah. David has a harem, Uriah only Bathsheba. David tried to get Uriah to eat and drink and sleep with Bathsheba. A traveller is literally a "walker". David walked on the roof of the palace. Then there is the "taking" of Bathsheba and the slaughter of Uriah. We know it's a parable. It's like hearing "three men walked into a bar", you know what you're about to hear isn't real. David should as well. But David misses the clues. His guilty conscience makes him anxious to do the right thing.²

David explodes in righteous and justified anger.

'As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! **6** He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.'

David is condemned from his own mouth. And now the spiritual surgeon Nathan thrusts the scalpel in. "You are the man!"

This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: "I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. **8** I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. **9** Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. **10** Now, therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own."

11 "This is what the LORD says: "Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight. **12** You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel."

David is undone. He thought he could cover things up, but now he lies naked before God. Through the rest of Samuel we'll see the terrible consequences of David's sin play out. David's casual "the sword devours one as well as another" is thrown back in his face. The sword will rip his household apart. His own son will sleep with his concubines on the roof of his palace. But for the moment, let's look at how David responds.

² Robert Alter, *The Story of David*, 257

Last time a prophet confronted the king of Israel with his sin he tried to wriggle his way out, making excuses, shifting the blame. What will David do?

Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD.'

Nathan replied, 'The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.'

It's so quick, blink and you'd miss it. On first reading it feels too easy. But there is a whole world in this brief exchange. We're going to take a moment to peer behind David's confession, "I have sinned against the LORD" and also how it is that Nathan can say, "The LORD has taken away your sin."

Repentance - Psalm 51

One of the extraordinary things about the story of David is that we don't just have the historical narrative of Samuel, we also have in the Psalms many of the songs that David wrote which give us a window into his inner life. And we know exactly what was going on for David at this moment because at the head of Psalm 51 we read,

When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

Psalm 51 is a prayer of deep repentance from a man who has been broken by his sin. In the Psalm we see some of the elements that go into making real repentance. We'll take them as they come in the Psalm.

First, there is the request for forgiveness.

Have mercy on me, O God,
 according to your unfailing love;
 according to your great compassion
 blot out my transgressions.
 Wash away all my iniquity
 and cleanse me from my sin.

Notice David understands the basis of forgiveness. It is not due to anything in him, but rather according to God's character - his unfailing love and great compassion. The essence of forgiveness is the removal of sin - washing clean, blotting out. Further this is something that only God can do, which is why David turns to God. David returns to the theme several times.

7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
 wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
9 Hide your face from my sins
 and blot out all my iniquity.

Second, there is the expression of contrition and confession.

17 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
 a broken and contrite heart
 you, God, will not despise.

Contrition is the start of real repentance. Often we can feel sorry for getting caught, or for suffering the consequences of what we've done. The problem with this is that we're still at the centre. David goes deeper than this. He's crushed by what he has done.

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.

He recognises that not only has he wronged another person, but that he has also offended against God.

4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.

This is what the apostle Paul calls "godly sorrow that brings repentance and leads to salvation."³

Theologian John Calvin writes,

"Sorrow according to God is when [someone] looks up to God, counts it their only misery to be cut off from his grace and in fear of his judgement mourn their sins."

I find it helpful to think about this in the context of a relationship. There have been times when I've wounded Claire deeply. I'm ashamed. I'm full of thoughts that would justify or excuse what I've done. It's hard to come to her to apologise. But when I lift my eyes to see her and the pain I have caused her, then I begin to truly grieve over what I've done - not for my sake but for hers. It's then that my sorrow becomes a motivation not just to say sorry and try and patch things up but to actually change my behaviour - to truly repent.

When we read Psalm 51 we can wonder, why does David say to God, "Against you, you only have I sinned"? Surely he's also sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, not to mention the other dead soldiers and the nation. I think what David is getting at is that in and under each of these actions there is an offence against God, the creator in whose image are those whom David has sinned against. Nathan reiterates this point. "Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes?" "you have shown utter contempt for the LORD". Indeed our consciousness of God acts as a safeguard against sinning against our neighbours. Our relationship with God needs healing just as much as our horizontal ones. On the horizontal level we may need to make restitution for what we've done. This goes some way to putting things right, but it can only ever be a token of our repentance. We cannot undo what has been done.

Contrition, Confession, asking forgiveness, and finally, the commitment to change, or repentance proper. This is at the heart of David's prayer, verse 10:

Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence

³ 2 Corinthians 7.10

or take your Holy Spirit from me.

What David recognises here is that he needs the work of the Holy Spirit to empower him to live the life God wants him to live. David is thinking about when God withdrew his Spirit from Saul. But next week we celebrate Pentecost, the day when the ascended Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on all who believe in his name. Unlike David we need not fear that God will withdraw his Spirit from us. We need God to change our hearts so that, as Augustine puts it, we love what he commands and desire what he promises. And so it is that as we confess, so we also ask the Holy Spirit to change us.

Forgiveness

Contrition, Confession, a Commitment to change. This is how we repent. And with repentance we can ask for forgiveness. We can only ask. Forgiveness is always and only ever a gift. But forgiveness is what we need for a relationship to be healed. How is it that Nathan can say to David, “The LORD has taken away your sin”? How is it that we can be cleansed and our sins washed away? This side of the cross we know that our forgiveness has been purchased at the cost of God’s own Son. He himself took our sin, and bore it in his body on the cross. There the just judgement of God was executed upon all the sins of the world even yours and mine, but it fell upon Jesus and not upon us. In Jesus we see the justice and mercy of God meet. And the result is free and full forgiveness even for people like David, and if for David then also for you and for me. And God has made the first move. Yes, we receive God’s forgiveness through repenting of our sins and trusting Jesus’ death for us. But we turn to God knowing his forgiving arms are open, waiting for us to come home. His mercy gives us air to breathe.

God’s forgiveness lavishly given in Christ is the wellspring we draw upon when others sin against us. Forgiveness is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. As we have received, so we are called to give. We pray, “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” because we need God’s help to forgive.

Death of a Son (14-25)

The wages of sin is death and David did deserve death for his adultery and murder. But the gift of God is forgiveness and life. Nathan declares God’s forgiveness of David. And yet, he still has to face the consequences of his sin. If the heart of repentance is a grief over sin, in the second half of our text today David faces a second grief over the death of his infant son. David had said that the rich man must pay for the lamb four times over. Now Nathan says to him,

“But because by doing this you have shown utter contempt for the LORD, the son born to you will die.”

The Talmud, the ancient Jewish commentary on the Scriptures, notes that 4 of David’s sons do indeed die. This infant, Amnon, Absalom and Adonijah. Through these verses we see David fasting and weeping, pleading with God to spare the life of his baby boy, but after a week this child dies. David says,

While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, “Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.” **23** But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.”

It’s a moment of utter desolation and grief.

We may have found it difficult to stomach God forgiving David for murder, but now this. It’s a hugely difficult text. And yet, just as we cannot understand the depths of God’s forgiveness, so the death of an infant remains incomprehensible to us. I do not understand what the link is between David’s sin and his son’s death. Structurally it’s there. Bathsheba mourns 7 days for Uriah, David 7 days for his son. A life for a life. But it resists explanation. It just is. In the face of such an awful tragedy we can think “this is God’s punishment for something I’ve done.” But the death of God’s own Son for our sin shows there is no intrinsic link between the death of a child and the sin of a parent. He has already taken our punishment.

What I do understand is David’s grief. I’m so conscious that reading and preaching this text on Mother’s Day will touch on wounds for some of us. Grief over children lost. Grief over childlessness. Grief over the loss of our own mothers. We know just a little of this ourselves. In 2019 Claire suffered a miscarriage early in pregnancy. It was so much worse for her losing the life growing inside her, where I could only see her pain. The most I’ve ever cried was at the funeral of my friend’s two year old son. I want to mention a booklet from the Bible society entitled, *My Tears in Your Bottle: Psalms and reflections of hope for grieving parents*. The title is taken from Psalm 56:8, written by David: “*You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each in your book.*” Feel free to take a copy from the back for yourself or to give away.

David’s grief is raw and real and in it we see God’s recognition of our griefs. I just wanted to note two things. Talking this last week with a parent who has lost a child, he said David’s words, “I will go to him, but he will not return to me” have been a source of comfort. I had only seen bleakness there, but he said he saw hope. And it’s true. For us who believe in the Good Shepherd who carries his little ones home there is hope that we will see those we love again. Second, when his son died, we read, David, “went into the house of the LORD and worshipped.” Even in the midst of the deepest grief, even though we do not understand, we can still come to the God who loves us.

We’ve seen two griefs today. A right grief at sin that leads to confession and repentance. And grief at the death of a son. In between stands the truth of God’s forgiveness that each of us so desperately needs to hear, “God has taken away your sins”. How? At the death of his own Son. And so even as we look to the cross for our forgiveness, so also in the cross we see that we have a God who knows our grief and sorrow because he has been there too, and even so he is with us today.