

King David's Adultery

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Bible Reading

In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (She had purified herself from her uncleanness.) Then she went back home. The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, "I am pregnant." . . .

David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. In it he wrote, "Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so that he will be struck down and die."

So while Joab had the city under siege, he put Uriah at a place where he knew the strongest defenders were. When the men of the city came out and fought against Joab, some of the men in David's army fell; moreover, Uriah the Hittite died. . . .

When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the Lord.

The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, 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.

"Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking 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."

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

Then Nathan said to David, "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. I gave your master's house to you, and

your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. 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. 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.' " (2 Samuel 11:1-5, 14-17, 26, 27; 12:1-10)

Reading from Swedenborg

If we want to be set free, we have to recognize our faults and regret them. We recognize our faults when we learn what sorts of things are wrong, see them in ourselves, admit them, take responsibility for them, and criticize ourselves for them. When we do this in front of God, we are recognizing our faults.

We regret our faults when, once we have admitted them and asked with a humble heart for help in giving them up, we stop acting on them and start living a new life in harmony with the rules of kindness and faith. (*The Heavenly City #159–161*)

Sermon

King David was the dream come true. It took over a thousand years, but God's promise to Abraham and Sarah that a great nation would spring from them seemed fulfilled at last in David's sparkling reign. Any rabbinical teacher will tell you King David represents the high point of ancient Israel. Not only did he mold King Saul's fledgling national Hebrew coalition of tribes into a minor empire, but he had star quality all over him. The Bible calls him handsome, with beautiful eyes and a ruddy complexion. In one person were amalgamated a marvelous, even sexy, array of talents. A fearless fighter, he broke into the Bible narrative as the secretly anointed but publicly unknown shepherd boy who volunteered to face the Philistine giant, Goliath, in a challenge match. Without donning a single piece of armor, he felled the enemy's fiercest warrior with a smooth river stone.

David in rapid succession became a military genius and then a brilliant city planner. Jerusalem's glory was his inspiration—and he built it. Artistic as well, King David developed the worship arts to new highs. He composed psalms that would serve the ages, and he was also superbly able on the lyre. When David played, it was said, everyone's problems seemed less important. Make no mistake: he was God's anointed one. In the first book of Kings, you can read how he went down in history: "David did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite" (1 Kings 15:5).

Ohhh, that. That little Uriah matter; that little Bathsheba matter. Hmmm, what did the independent prosecutor turn up? That he had taken one fatal look at Bathsheba and plotted to have her. That when she became pregnant, David's strategical mind went into high gear. That the first thing he tried was a coverup. If he could get Uriah and Bathsheba to spend a romantic weekend together, Uriah might believe the child was his own. The only problem was that Uriah was out of town fighting a battle, and like all other soldiers he was sworn to celibacy until the fighting season was over. David ordered him back to Jerusalem and told him to go see his wife, but Uriah refused. The same thing happened the next

day. So the day after that, David invited Uriah to supper and got him drunk; but still Uriah refused to go home to Bathsheba.

Exasperated by Uriah's loyalty, David changed his strategy. He wrote a letter to Uriah's commander Joab that said, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."

This time it went down exactly as the king ordered. Uriah was killed. Bathsheba mourned him; and when her mourning was over she became David's wife and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and before the baby could make a fist, Nathan the prophet was knocking on the front door of the palace, sent by God to confront the king.

The way he did it was pure genius: not head-on, like a Beltway litigator, but sideways, with a story. Why did he take such an indirect route? Because he had not come to condemn David. That would have been easy enough to do, given the facts at hand. But Nathan was up to something much more profound than that. He had come to change David's life, if he could—to help the king see what he had done so that his conscience would be elevated and his sense of justice restored. Then Israel might have the king she was supposed to have, instead of this handsome hero whose power had begun to stink.

If David could see that—if he could pronounce judgment on himself—the impact would be a hundred times greater than if Nathan did it for him. But it called for real restraint on Nathan's part. He had to contain his anger and resist the temptation to do David's work for him.

So Nathan told David a story, knowing good and well how human beings tend to drop their defenses while they are listening to a story about someone else. When words are not aimed right at us, we can usually receive the message more purely. And so when Nathan told him about the rich man with many flocks and the poor man with nothing but one little ewe lamb, and how the rich man stole even the poor man's lamb, David's heart and conscience saw the thing clearly—and he pronounced a swift verdict and a death sentence on that one who had done such a despicable thing. He pronounced a verdict on that rich man—on that man who already had so much, and whose appetite was so roaring out of control that he felt that anything he could get was his fair share, and it didn't matter how his rapacious appetite affected others.

"You are that man!" Nathan told him; and David's heart split in two. "I have sinned against the Lord," he said—not because Nathan had told him so but because he saw it for himself. And that was the beginning of his coming back to life again.

Think about it: he had broken three commandments in short order: thou shalt not covet, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not kill. And in the depth of his conscientious confession, he even condemned himself to death. But that was not what God had in mind for him.

"The Lord has put away your sin," Nathan told him. "You shall not die." That was the first important news. The bad news was that the sword would never be absent from his household. A straightforward reading of this story provides an essential principle of our spiritual lives, namely, that even in our worst occasions of sin God's goal is not to punish, but to help us become aware of the ugliness of our choice and to feel the wrongness of such choices, so that we can be inspired to throw off the old will and let the Lord flow into our minds and hearts with renewing impulses to live aright.

Swedenborg, however, helps us go deeper and more completely into an understanding of sin, repentance, and reformation. Serving as a backdrop for the human challenge, we must accept that it is part of being human to make deep and grievous mistakes spiritually—to sin. In the inner sense of David's story, we come to see that every sin is a consequence of spiritual adultery, because adultery in the spiritual sense is to separate truth from goodness.

Marriage in the spiritual sense is the union of good and truth, which is the mechanism for life expressing itself. Adultery as something that breaks up a marriage in the spiritual sense has to do with mixing falsity into previously good intentions. To desire love is intrinsically good. But David rationalized his desire to have this potentially beautiful thing with Bathsheba, another man's wife. So he split up a marriage on two levels—literal and metaphysical. Adultery was the precipitating cause of David's great sin. In the inner sense this is so because as we move into our productive years, the primary spiritual dynamic we deal with is spiritual adultery: the temptation to compromise our early idealism.

Spiritual adultery occurs with everyone, and that is why David and Bathsheba is our own story. The inevitability of spiritual adultery begins with the fact that we always understand a higher ideal than we can fully live out. When we are young, we often have a great deal of confidence that we will be able to fulfill our ideals a lot better than the generations before us. This is the young David, the shepherd boy who slayed Goliath. But in the path of real life, the matter of soul development gets very intense as we move into our twenties and thirties. It is tough to remain pure and innocent as we build Jerusalem and a great army and new cultural institutions.

It is impossible not to mix in some falsity with our ideals as we begin to live a real life in the world. I once had a very close friend who was a pothead. He truly believed, as so many did and do, that he was more brilliant when stoned. He was a very idealistic and wonderful person; but it was obvious to me that his drug habit was curtailing his potential. I look back now and see his vociferous arguments about drugs actually helping his potential as one of his particular versions of spiritual adultery. (Take it on good authority: he was not more brilliant when he was stoned!)

But let's remember the good news. David's story assures us that on the regeneration path we gradually master our various temptations to spiritual adultery, slowly building an inner foundation of experiential strength in uniting with healthy and constructive behaviors. Still, the "reality piece" is sobering: once we commit a sin, we set off consequences that are not easy to overturn. The pull of the hells is powerful. Frequently we cannot walk away from the inner consequences of volitional sin that easily, and we find that Nathan's prophecy bears out in our living: "Therefore, the sword will not depart from your house."

The heavenly doctrines suggest that our sins have spiritual consequences for our characterological makeup that even the Lord cannot annul. Sin can be forgiven and then redeemed, but that redemption is not an erasure. It is like the addict whose recovery leads to an incredible strength; but it is a strength that has not only a memory in it, but a taste as well. Swedenborg says that even with angels in the most advanced states of love and wisdom, the effect of sin remain forever—even though it may be eternally pushed farther and farther to the periphery of the soul's conscious life.

Indeed, that "sword" provided a cutting edge for David's soul for the rest of his long life. Amnon, Solomon, Absalom and other offspring represented episodes of subsequent spinoffs of his profound sin of spiritual adultery. The deeper message for us is that we need to know that our own versions of spiritual adultery will take a while for us to really get under control, even with productive regeneration.

This lengthy and intense struggle is part of the contract for obtaining eternal life. “Sanctification,” to use an old evangelical term, takes a lot of work.

David’s psalms are dramatic renderings of the inner processes in regeneration. In the psalms we see his courageous vision and his humbled lowness. And especially, we see his persistence and ultimate progress as a truly wise and authentic spiritual leader.

Psalm 51 is an expression in verse of David’s wrestling with his greatest sin. Its words are a part of our traditional liturgy: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me . . . restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit” (*Psalms 51:10, 12*).

King David! The most attractive figure in the Hebrew Testament. From Boy Wonder to military and civic genius to spiritual leader, David’s is the greatest story, not because of his winsomeness and his accomplishments, but because with all his promise and talent, he sinned so spectacularly—and then knew what he had to do about it.

Prayer

Jehovah God, Creator and Ruler of all the universe, we thank you that you have given us dominion over the earth and over our own lives. We thank you for the respect and trust you give us, believing that we are capable of making our own decisions and directing our own lives. Yet when we anoint ourselves king and master of our lives, as exhilarating as this can be with all its exciting challenges and victories, we find that we never quite measure up. All too often, we make blunders on a royal scale. Give us the wisdom and humility, O Lord, to hear your prophetic voice within us, and recognize when we have made a terrible mistake. And though the consequences of our mistakes will always be with us, make them, we pray, the material from which a better character is built. Amen.

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