

Good for the Soul
A Sermon for Every Sunday
2 Samuel 11:26 – 12:13a

David said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”

It’s only a hunch, but I have a hunch that the 23rd Psalm may have been among the first ones David ever wrote. I’ve told you before that I picture it written on lined notebook paper, with a Number 2 pencil, and eraser marks all over the page, turned in like an eighth-grade writing assignment in answer to the question, “Who is the Lord to you?” I can almost see David chewing on the end of his pencil before beginning to write:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.

Short, simple, declarative sentences. David probably didn’t even mean for it to be poetry, but it is, isn’t it? It’s profound. It speaks to each of us on the deepest imaginable level. “The Lord is my shepherd.”

As I said, I believe that David wrote it early in his life, perhaps while he was still a shepherd, keeping his father’s sheep in and around Bethlehem. Shepherds in that time and place would often have to lead their sheep out through the Judean wilderness for days at a time, searching for those green pastures David writes about. They would bed down their flocks in rocky canyons and cock their ears for the sounds of predators nearby. I can imagine David as a boy, caring for those sheep but wondering, “Who will care for me? Out here in this wilderness where I am all alone and unprotected? Who will be *my* shepherd?” And the answer that echoed back from the walls of those canyons was this:

“The Lord!” And as soon as he heard it he knew it was true. “The Lord is *my* shepherd; I shall not want! He makes *me* lie down in green pastures. He leads *me* beside still waters. He restores *my* soul. The Lord, is my shepherd!”

The psalm speaks of a relationship between God and David that was intimate, and personal. You can imagine David leading those sheep through the wilderness and carrying on long conversations with God. Some of his later psalms have that familiar quality about them, as if David was accustomed to speaking with, maybe not face-to-face but heart-to-heart. Sometimes he begins by describing God in the third person and then shifting to the second: “The Lord is wonderful! You, O God, are near to all who call on you.” David enjoyed a friendship with God that was born in the wilderness when he was all alone except for God (well, and those sheep). Wherever David went the Lord was and wherever the Lord was there was David, too. So that David’s fondest wish, expressed at the end of Psalm 23, is that he might live in the presence of the Lord forever.

Psalm 8 is another of those that reveals the intimacy between God and David. I picture David stretched out on the ground beside his sheep somewhere in the wilderness, looking up at the night sky and saying, “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established? I feel about this big. What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? And yet you have made us a little lower than the angels.” Here is David marveling at God’s goodness and God’s nearness, God’s protection, God’s provision. David was the friend of God, and God was David’s friend.

And so, when a lion or bear attacked David’s flock, David went after it, caught it by the jaw, clubbed it down, and killed it, with never a concern for his own safety,

because God was with him. The Lord went into battle with him, fought for him, so that David could say to Goliath, that giant: “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel. This very day he will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head and give the flesh of the Philistine army to the birds of the air to eat.” God was with David, David was with God. Wherever they went the two of them were bound together by this wonderful friendship.

But after Goliath was killed, Saul made David commander over a thousand soldiers in the army of Israel. David led those soldiers out into battle and to tell the truth it was a little confusing afterward to figure out who had won the battle. Was it the Lord? Was it these well-trained soldiers? Or was it, perhaps, David himself who deserved the credit? Everywhere he went he won battles, so that his reputation begin to spread as a great warrior. A thousand soldiers fighting under his command and others along the way. Eventually all of Judah recognized him as their king and then all of Israel, too, so that David ruled over the land from Dan to Beersheba, and when he told the people to do something they did it. You get the feeling that David was not only growing up, but somehow also growing away from God.

If it’s true that power corrupts, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely, David was getting a taste of that kind of power. In the early chapters of the story you hear him asking God over and over again, “Shall we go up? Shall we fight against the Philistines?” In the later chapters that question is strangely absent. David makes his own decisions, he fights his own battles, he does his own thing. And one day he did a thing that displeased his old friend very much. Those of you who were here last week heard

the story of David's adultery with Bathsheba. You know how he tried to cover the tracks of his sin by inviting her husband Uriah home from the war to sleep with her. And when he wouldn't you know how David arranged his death by sending him to the front lines. After Bathsheba heard the news, and after she had grieved for her husband, David took her into his own house and made her his wife. For a while, at least, he must have believed that he had successfully covered his sin. But someone had seen it. God had seen it. Nothing escapes his notice. The author of 2 Samuel says it in one blunt sentence:

“The thing David had done displeased the Lord.”

This is the first time in the story that anything David has done displeases the Lord. But this thing displeased him. And this thing distanced David from his old friend. That's the thing about sin: it separates. It separates us from the people we have wronged and often from the people we love. Sin creates this gulf between us and them so that relationship becomes impossible. I cannot imagine that while Bathsheba's belly swelled with the evidence of David's adultery David was plucking his lyre and singing songs of praise to the Lord. More likely he was keeping his distance, hiding his face from the one he used to seek with his whole heart. All around him people were saying, “David, you are a wonderful king, the greatest king who has ever lived!” But every time he looked in the mirror he saw the face of a sinner. And so it was almost a relief when Nathan the prophet came to him and said, “Let me tell you a story:

“There were two men who lived in a certain city. One was rich and the other was poor. One had very many flocks and herds, the other had nothing except a little ewe lamb that he had bought and that he brought up along with his children. It used to eat from his table, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and he loved it like a

daughter. It just so happened that an out-of-town guest came to stay with the rich man, and he, not wanting to take an animal from his own flocks and herds, took the poor man's lamb and slaughtered it, roasted it, and served it to his guest. What do you think about that?"

David was filled with righteous indignation. He said, "The man who has done this thing deserves to die! And he will pay back four times what he took from the one who had the lamb." Nathan swallowed hard and said to King David, "You are the man. And thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over this entire nation, and I took you from following the flocks in your father's field and made you king. I gave you the house of your predecessor, Saul. I gave you his wives, his concubines, the future that should have been his, and if that wasn't enough I would have given you more. And yet you have despised me, and you have broken my commandments, and because of that the sword will never depart from your house, violence will be your family name. Believe me, you will pay for your sin!'"

And David said, "I have sinned against the Lord."

He had already sinned against Bathsheba. Anyone who had been in that room that night would have known that. And he had certainly sinned against his friend Uriah, sending him to the front lines to be killed. But now it became clear to him that he had not only sinned against them, but also against the Lord. And to hear Nathan accuse him of it, to have it out in the open at last, came almost as a relief. He had been carrying that terrible secret for months, but now there it was, out there where it could be acknowledged and dealt with.

Not that it would be easy.

The thing about actions is that they always have consequences. It's true for you and me; it was true for David. Nathan told him that as a consequence of his actions violence would come to his house, death would come. And yet, in the end, God was bigger than his sin or any consequences that would follow. God was able and willing to forgive even this.

In the collection of psalms David wrote there is one with a preface that reads: "This is the psalm David wrote when he was confronted by Nathan the prophet, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." It's only a hunch, but I have a hunch this psalm was among the last David ever wrote. Read through them some time, all of those attributed to David. Again and again you will see him appealing to the Lord for help when he is surrounded by his enemies, talking about what it is like to be a king, sometimes saying, "I love your law, O Lord! What a privilege it is to keep your commandments!" You get a feeling those were written in the early days. But this one, the one that we call Psalm 51, may have been among the last David ever wrote. It goes like this:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquities. Cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins. Blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God. Put a new and right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation.

It's only a hunch, but I have a hunch this psalm may have been among the last David ever wrote, and I believe that when he got up off his knees after that prayer he found that his friendship with God had been restored, and he walked away from the place of prayer in the presence of God, just like in the old days.

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