

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 17: 2 Samuel 11-12; Psalm 51 The Story of David, Greatest King of Israel

by Virgil Thompson

Undoubtedly David was the greatest king ever to rule over the people of God. That's what makes the adulterous affair with Bathsheba all the more tragic.

For faith, the story of David's affair with Bathsheba is more important than all the other stories of David rolled into one. More important than the slaying of Goliath. More important in fact than slaying his tens of thousands to secure the peace. More important than twice sparing the life of Saul. More important than everything else about which David might rightly have boasted!

You might have imagined that the Bible would have conveniently neglected to include the story, hidden it away in some dark corner. But, no, the Bible brings it out into the noon-day sun. And how fortunate for sinners like us! There is nothing from the story of David, as Luther points out in his commentary on Psalm 51, that goes as far as proclaiming the truth of the Gospel for faith today than the affair with Bathsheba. In this story faith learns—as David learned in the sermon of Nathan—what it means to live as a forgiven sinner. Ironic as it may seem, it is only by inescapably coming under the condemnation of Nathan's, "*You are the man!*" that there is promise of receiving the newness of life that comes of God's gracious forgiveness.

No matter what else may be said to sum up what it means to live as a Christian, at heart a Christian is one who believes to the tips of the toes that our justification comes apart from works of the law. It comes solely through God's "*grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 3:21-22). This is David's story, the story of how David came to know himself as a child of Christ the Lord (see Mark 12:35-37).

In the Spring of the Year

"It happened," according to the Bible story, "*late one spring*

afternoon," as David strolled about the palace roof. From his lofty vantage point he sees a woman bathing in the all-together. And the woman was very beautiful (2 Samuel 11:2). Now of course there is no sin in noticing the beauty of a woman. When Adam first got sight of Eve he was head over heels for her beauty! Together they were naked and not ashamed. But the difference between Adam noticing the beauty of Eve and David noticing the naked beauty of Bathsheba is that Adam and Eve had been given to one another as husband and wife by the Lord God. For this reason, as the Biblical storyteller tells it, a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife. There is nothing whatsoever wrong with a husband and a wife noticing and enjoying the beauty of one another. From Chapter two of Genesis forward the Bible is quite clear about that.

The trouble brewing in Chapter 11 of 2 Samuel is that God had not given Bathsheba to David and David had not been given to Bathsheba. She was married to another, Uriah the Hitite, a soldier in David's army. And likewise, David was married to another—in fact, to a number of others.

David, of course, knew from the very first introduction—"This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hitite," that he and she did not belong together as husband and wife (2 Samuel 11:3). But it did not matter to David. He "*sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her*" (11:4). That brief narrative of the affair may leave much to the imagination, but the Bible leaves nothing to the imagination of the result of the affair: "*Bathsheba conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am pregnant'*" (11:5).

The Cover-Up

Upon hearing the news, David summons Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hitite, home from the field of battle where Uriah has put his life on the line to guard and protect

the realm of King David. Uriah arrives home with news from the front. Grateful for the report, David encourages Uriah to take advantage of his leave to pay a conjugal visit to his wife, Bathsheba (11:8a).

It does not take a great military strategist to see David's devious scheme. What David does not consider is that Uriah is a particularly moral, loyal and dedicated soldier. He refuses to sleep with his wife when all his comrades are still at the front under battle conditions. In solidarity with them he spends the night at the gate with the palace guard. As he explains to David,

My lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing!

— 2 Samuel 11:11

Even as David seeks to wear down Uriah's resolve with food and plenty of drink, the soldier remains by his soldierly solidarity. So David in defeat sends Uriah back to the front with secret instructions to the general in charge: "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die" (11:15).

When news of Uriah's death in service of his country becomes generally known, David, just to show what a great king he is, takes the grieving widow, Bathsheba, into the palace and adopts her son as though he were his own child. No doubt the cover-up would have been to David's credit completely successful, but for one unforeseen eventuality.

The Lord Sent Nathan to David

Nathan confronts the great King David with a despicable sin that has been committed right under the king's nose. Nathan explains to David,

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he raised ... It was like a daughter to him. Now as it happened that a traveler had come to the rich man's house for a visit. The rich man was loath to take one of his own flock, so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for his guest. Upon hearing the report of what had transpired, David was irate. He vowed to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who had done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" — 2 Samuel 12:1-7

Nothing more needed to be said. There was no escaping the judgment. As Luther explains, "David wanted to look like a holy man who loved right and justice. This doubled the sin. Not only did he cover up the vicious murder of Uriah, but ... the name of the Lord was blasphemed" (LW 12:306). David's sin—against practically every Commandment in the Book—may have been committed in secret. However, the judgment came under the bright sun of midday, exposing the king's sin to all the world. The only thing David could do was confess, "I have sinned against the Lord" (12:13).

The End of Confession is the Beginning of Absolution

You may not think that being caught in the act of a great and shameful sin is a particular blessing. No doubt David suffered the judgment of God, and the confession to which it drove him, as a death. What else could he do but throw himself on the mercy of the Lord?

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 iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

— Psalm 51:1-2

"David's sin," Luther observes, "is a very moving example of grace and sin ... The fact that such a great man—filled with the Holy Spirit, with the highest good works and divine wisdom ... should have fallen so miserably is an example for us ... For here shines the goodness and mercy of God, who is ready to forgive sins and to justify us, just as long as we do not add to our sin a denial that we have sinned" (LW 12:306).

Psalm 51 ~ Theological knowledge of God and Humanity

With David's story in 2 Samuel 11 and 12 and his confession in Psalm 51, we come to the very heart of our faith: the true theological understanding of God and ourselves. As Luther explains, "The proper subject of theology is humans guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of

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the sinner. Anything, asked or discussed in theology outside this subject, is error and poison. All Scripture points to this!” (LW 12:311).

This is most certainly true. The confession of sin is the beginning of life in the absolution. And where there is forgiveness, as Luther explains in the Small Catechism, there is life and salvation. Here in the absolution we are permitted and justified to believe, “though I am a sinner in myself, I am not a sinner in Christ. In Christ I am justified because he belongs to sinners and was sent for sinners” (LW 12:311).

Looking Ahead: We Three Kings – The Wisdom of Solomon (1 Samuel – 1 Kings)

Upon David’s eventual death, his son Solomon ascended the throne of kingship over the people

of God. To him God gave very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. — I Kings 4:29-30

In the next installment of reading the Bible with Luther, we take up the story of Solomon’s wisdom. This is the wisdom about which Paul declared,

We speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this ... “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

— 1 Corinthians 2:7-16

reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



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Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series offers suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. Luther observes that the story of David in 2 Samuel 11 and 12 sets the stage for Psalm 51, but he goes on to make the point that the Psalm is not exhausted in David’s confession. Rather, the Psalm is an “example of prayer for all sins ... It talks about the whole of sin, about the root of sin, not merely about the outward works of sin.” What do you think Luther means by this distinction between the outward works of sin and the root of sin? If you would like to read firsthand Luther’s explanation, you will find it in volume 12 of *Luther’s Works*. Luther’s treatment of Psalm 51 in this volume is among his most important works.
2. In a famous passage from his commentary on Psalm 51 (LW 12:312-26), Luther draws a distinction between the naked God in his majesty and God who comes to us hidden behind a very pleasant mask and dressed in his promises. From the absolute God everyone who does not

want to perish should flee, Luther counsels, because we could not stand to know God in His naked majesty. But revealed in His promises we can grasp and look at God with joy and trust. As you think about this distinction, how does it help to understand your own experience in the life of faith?

3. As you think about this portion of the Biblical story, consider the questions below:
 - a. *What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about the story? Why?*
 - b. *What background knowledge would help me understand the story more clearly? How does my experience help me to understand the story?*
 - c. *What does this story promise to faith? What does this book demand of faith?*

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