

Confrontation, Conviction and Confession

Once there was a duke who boarded a galley ship, rowed by condemned criminals. He went down below deck and began interviewing the slaves, asking them what their offenses were. Without fail, each one said he was innocent, he had been framed, he had been falsely accused, the judge had been bribed, someone else was at fault. Finally the duke came to a man who said, "Sir, I am here because I deserve to be. I stole. No one else is at fault but myself. I am guilty." Hearing this, the duke took the man by the shoulders, and began shouting, "You scoundrel, you! What are you doing in the company of all these innocent, honest men? Get out of here at once!" At that, he was unchained from his oar, set free, while the rest were left to tug at their oars. The key to his freedom was his honest confession of guilt.

Honest confession of guilt is the key to freedom for anyone. And the opposite, holding on to my self-righteousness, excusing myself is always the path to bondage.

That was clearly the case in the life of David. Last week, we considered his great fall, as he dabbled with temptation, and then allowed it to capture him. A tragic fall of a model believer. But David's sin would not remain hidden, for it never can. Sin is always covered and then uncovered, or uncovered and then covered. If you cover your sin, God will uncover it and bring discipline and shame. If you uncover your sin to God, God will cover it with His atoning work.

In 2 Samuel 12, we'll see six stages of sin's uncovering in the life of a man who was covering it up. We begin with something silently in the passage, but actually revealed elsewhere, in the Psalms.

I. The Conscience of the King

In the initial aftermath of sin, the quiet makes the sinner feel that he has succeeded. David got the girl he wanted, and when there was the consequence that she was pregnant, he successfully covered that up by having her husband killed, and marrying her as quickly as possible. David can't be accused of being an adulterer, because the child will be his, borne of his now-wife, Bathsheba. He can't be accused of being a murderer, because Uriah was killed in battle, by the Ammonites, not by him. Apparently, David thinks, it worked. Because the text tells us that month after month passed, and the child was born, and David has not been caught. At least nine months, if not a year since the sin has passed.

But what has David's condition been internally? He tells us exactly what he went through in Psalm 32.

³ When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long. ⁴ For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah (Ps. 32:3-4)

David's conscience afflicted him and aged him, day after day. In moments of peace, Uriah's face would flash before him. He knew what the law required for an adulterer and adulteress. He knew he had murdered Uriah by proxy. In moments of quiet, he would hear the accusation: "Adulterer! Murderer!" Worse, David was the man to restore true piety to Israel after Saul. He was the man of integrity, of spirituality, of humility, and here he was, living in hypocrisy, giving the enemy occasion to blaspheme and mock God.

Day and night he felt conviction, and every joy seemed to dry up. Food was tasteless. His harem of wives now only reminded him of his sin. The young child of Bathsheba filled him with the mixture of shame and joy. He could barely look in the faces of those servants in the palace who knew at least of one part of his sin, and now when Joab looked in his eyes, he could see the wily expression

of a man who could blackmail him for the rest of his life. As he said in Psalm 51, his sin was ever before him. The guilt was there, always there, oppressively there, suffocatingly there. It was like having a fever all the time, wasting away in health, unable to do his work, irritable with all around him.

Why? Because as he says, he kept silent. He refused to confess. He wouldn't face his sin and face his God at the same time. For something close to a year, David kept up the public appearance of being religious, while being far from God.

One of God's greatest gifts to you is your conscience. This is that faculty of your heart and mind that judges whether you have done right or wrong. According to Romans 2:15, it is either accusing or excusing you: condemning you, or exonerating you, making excuses for you or making charges against you. Your conscience is like an alarm that goes off, telling you that something is wrong: there's an intruder in the house, or the car has run out of oil. When an alarm goes off, you can do two things: you can check if the thing it is warning you about is true, or you can cut the wires of the alarm. Many people choose the second option with their consciences: they disconnect the alarm, punch out the flashing light. They ignore the warning, tell it to be quiet and distract themselves with entertainments, and amusements, and hobbies, and busyness. Do that long enough, and you can eventually get used to ignoring it. You will be restless and miserable like David, but you can adapt.

Psalm 36:2 For he flattereth himself in his own eyes, until his iniquity be found to be hateful.

But God is merciful, and does not let His children remain in their self-imposed misery. God revealed to Nathan the prophet what David had done. God then commissioned the prophet to go and confront David.

II. The Confrontation of the King

Then the LORD sent Nathan to David. (2 Sam. 12:1)

Think about the courage of this prophet. He has been told to go and accuse the king of sins worthy of the death penalty. The king of Israel is essentially the law court: the final judge, jury and executioner. Nathan must go to him, and say, you are guilty, and you deserve death.

This could be Nathan's last day on Earth. Not many people would have accepted this assignment. He is going to be the only man with the courage to speak to the wealthiest and most powerful man in Israel, the man who may well have paid Nathan's salary and tell him the truth.

But Nathan had more than courage. He also has exquisite shrewdness and communicative ability. While preparing to go to the king, Nathan began thinking of how to confront the king. To walk in the throne-room shouting "*Adulterous murderer!*" at the top of his voice would not achieve anything except, likely his own execution. Asking David questions about Bathsheba would just have produced a guarded, suspicious evasiveness.

Nathan then came up with a parable, a story, about injustice. It was the king's role to uphold justice, and David would have thought Nathan was telling him about a real case needing the king's judgement. And to make it pull on the heartstrings of David, who had been a shepherd in his youth, it was a story that involved a poor man, a pet lamb, and a selfish wealthy man.

2 Samuel 12:1 And he came to him, and said to him: "There were two men in one city, one rich and the other poor. ² "The rich *man* had exceedingly many flocks and herds. ³ "But the poor *man* had nothing, except

one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food and drank from his own cup and lay in his bosom; and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴ "And a traveler came to the rich man, who refused to take from his own flock and from his own herd to prepare one for the wayfaring man who had come to him; but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."

Here is a brilliant story with all the ingredients to stir up David's sense of righteous anger. A wealthy man with more than enough who eats one of his thousands of animals any day of the week. A man with almost nothing, who chooses to keep a lamb only as a pet. David would have remembered having some of those himself. And then this powerful man has a visitor, and is obliged to show him hospitality. But with ample with flocks to spare, he used his power to rob the poor family of their pet and consume it. Greed, selfishness and abuse of power all in one.

We can imagine David being drawn into this tale, finally on the edge of his seat. Could such arrogant abuse of wealth and power truly be done in Israel?

⁵ So David's anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this shall surely die! ⁶ "And he shall restore fourfold for the lamb, because he did this thing and because he had no pity."

Actually, according to the Law of Moses in Exodus 22:1, all that this crime required was for the rich man to restore fourfold to the poor man. There was no death penalty for stealing a lamb. There was the death penalty for adultery and murder.

David exaggerates the crime and the punishment, expending on others the harshness which he ought to have dealt out to himself. Sometimes we excuse our own sin by our harsh and uncharitable judgements on others; the uneasy conscience always sees specks in other people's eyes as if they are logs.

But on the other hand, the parable provoked righteous indignation. David's heart felt what a good heart should feel when there is such an outrageous, flagrant use of power and wealth to steal from the powerless. It is not just the theft but the pride, the arrogance, the high-handed rebellion, the callous and sadistic cruelty to another. This is evil, and it deserves to be judged.

And with that, David had taken the bait, and walked into Nathan's trap. He had passed sentence on himself. And then locking eyes with David, perhaps raising his pointed finger, this courageous prophet now took the knife of conviction that David had brought to his own throat, and slit it.

⁷ Then Nathan said to David, "You *are* the man!"

Two words in Hebrew: Atah Haish! You are the man. You are that sadistic, cruel, rich man, robbing others, using your power and wealth to exploit, steal, and destroy when it suits you. I wonder if David's mouth didn't drop open, if he didn't blink and stare at this prophet, as his sins were now brought out and publicly revealed.

If you will allow the Word of God into your life, by sitting under sound preaching, by reading it thoughtfully, by studying it, there will be times when God's Word will, just like Nathan's story, seem to be talking about something else, seem to be describing history, or stories or wisdom sayings, or letters to other people, and then suddenly it will strike: You are that person! You are the one being described, being rebuked, being exposed!

If you have felt that, then you have experienced the Holy Spirit's conviction. You have experienced the moment when God confronts you with who you really are in the Word of God.

III. The Conviction of the King

Thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. ⁸ 'I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your keeping, and gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if *that had been* too little, I also would have given you much more! ⁹ 'Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife *to be* your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the people of Ammon. ¹⁰ 'Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' ¹¹ "Thus says the LORD: 'Behold, I will raise up adversity against you from your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes and give *them* to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. ¹² 'For you did *it* secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun.'"

Nathan now brings out the application of his parable. David is like the rich man. God had blessed him with the throne of Israel, with all the wealth and wives that came with it. David did not lack wine, women or wealth. And had David wanted more, God would have given him more lawfully.

But instead, at the root of David's sin was arrogant discontent. He had everything, and when you have everything, the only things that become interesting are the things you cannot have. And from pride discontent, comes arrogant coveting, and soon David wanted only what he could not have: someone else's wife.

Like the man in the parable, he preferred the forbidden, taking what was not his, and in so doing, destroying another man: Uriah.

David's murder and adultery according to Nathan was a despising of God's commandments and a despising of God Himself.

David would now experience God's hand of discipline upon him for these sins, and Nathan describes the details of that discipline.

David had now seen himself in the mirror of God's Word. Not what he fancied himself to be, or what he hoped others would think him to be, or the facade he had painted of himself. He saw what God thought of him. He saw who he was.

It is never pleasant to have your sin and failure paraded before your eyes. Some people refuse it altogether. In fact, one of the major differences between the righteous and the unrighteous in the final analysis will be that the righteous were willing to go through the discomfort of being convicted, or being found guilty. Those who will run a mile before facing their own guilt and sin are also running a mile away from forgiveness and mercy.

But there is a simpler, shorter, and sharper solution. It hurts, but it heals. It is painful, but profitable. It is what David did next.

IV. The Confession of the King

¹³ So David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD."

And here we have back the David we know: the man after God's own heart.

Think of all the comebacks that he could have thrown at Nathan.

"Look, it's been a stressful time, I've been under enormous pressure, and I've made some mistakes."

"Listen, Nathan, like you, I've done some things in my life that I'm not proud of, but I'm moving on

and I've forgiven myself.”

“And what are you, Mr. Perfect? Living in your holy ivory tower? I bet there's enough skeletons in your closet! What gives you the right to come and tell me about my life! You mind your own business!”

“You know, Nathan, it's the way you have confronted me now that offends me. I would have come right with God, and that's between me and Him anyway, but the way you just confronted me was sneaky and deceptive. You trapped me, and that wasn't kind or godly. I think you have a bigger problem than I do!”

You know why this sounds familiar. Because it is what sinners do when conviction comes: blame the messenger, blame the circumstance, minimise the sin, distract from the issue. It's all over the Bible. Adam says – it's the woman you gave me! Aaron says, the people gave me their gold and out came this calf! Saul says, you were late so I forced myself and sacrificed. The Samaritan woman changes the subject from her five husbands to the location of the Temple. Herod has John the Baptist arrested and imprisoned when he's convicted.

David does none of that. No hiding, no running, no evading. Open, honest, vulnerable confession. “I have sinned against Yahweh. David's neck is not stiffening, it is bending; his heart is not hardening, it is broken and contrite.

Here, David confessed publicly before God's spokesman: one clear line of admission, ownership of guilt, and full responsibility for his own wrongdoing. But then David took up the quill that had undoubtedly been dry during his year of hardening his heart, and he wrote Psalm 51. There, he wrote line after line describing his confession.

Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your lovingkindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin *is* always before me. ⁴ Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done *this* evil in Your sight-- That You may be found just when You speak, *And* blameless when You judge. (Ps. 51:1-4)

What does David mean that against God only has he sinned? David knows he has sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba and all the men that Joab had killed so as to kill Uriah, and all their families. What David means is that sin is ultimately and finally an offense against God. This is part of confession. He is not comparing himself with other sinners, blaming others, or involving others. That's the first thing we do when we are not confessing: we try to get the attention off ourselves and off God. But David makes his confession a solitary encounter between himself and God. David is exposed, and without excuse. His sin is ultimately an offense against God.

David says that by agreeing with God about his own sin, he is vindicating God. When we confess, we are saying, yes, God told me so, I was wrong, He was right all along. God and I don't share the blame: there is one party who is entirely right, and one party who is entirely wrong. God is right; I am wrong. That's what it means to confess.

The promise of Scripture to believers is 1 John 1:9: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So the next thing we see is the cleansing.

V. The Cleansing of the King

And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die.

Can it really be that immediate? Can the transaction take place so quickly? Yes: God forgives immediately, not gradually. God either cancels the debt or He doesn't; but He does not exact it from you in bits and pieces. You owe God; but if you confess your sin based upon His provision of atonement in His Son on the cross, you are forgiven.

For an Old Testament believer, there was a faithful trust in what God provided in the Temple to forgive and cleanse, knowing that it pointed forward to a final and ultimate sacrifice. David knew that the animal sacrifice were temporary. Not only that, but there was no sacrifice for high-handed rebellion, like David's. That's why he wrote:

¹⁶ For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give *it*; You do not delight in burnt offering.

¹⁷ The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart-- These, O God, You will not despise. (Ps. 51:16-17)

But once someone is cleansed, what is the experience? David tells you in Psalm 51.

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Make me hear joy and gladness, *That* the bones You have broken may rejoice. ⁹ Hide Your face from my sins, And blot out all my iniquities. ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me *by Your* generous Spirit. ¹³ *Then* I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners shall be converted to You. ¹⁴ Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, The God of my salvation, *And* my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise. (Ps. 51:7-15)

The conviction and guilt is over. The sense of defilement is gone. The spirit experiences strength again. The joy returns. The moral boldness and willingness to speak up for God returns. The song returns. You uncover it to God, and God will cover it at His expense.

All of this awaits the believer who confesses.

But what about justice? What about justice for Uriah? Has David got away with it?

VI. The Consequences for the King

"However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also *who is* born to you shall surely die (2 Sam. 12:14)

God has already announced the consequences of David's sin in verses 11 through 12. David would now experience a chastening in keeping with his sin. Had he used the sword against Uriah? The sword would not depart from his own house. Had he secretly taken someone else's wife? Someone would do that to him, not secretly, but publicly.

On top of that, the child born to Bathsheba would now die. In fact, just as David had said that such a man should restore fourfold what he had taken, several ancient rabbis noticed that David experienced a fourfold retribution in the death of four of his children: the unnamed infant son of Bathsheba, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah.

Sin can be quickly cleansed, but consequences cannot be quickly erased. David will not bear the penalty for his sin, Jesus the Messiah will. But the rest of David's life will be plagued by his home torn apart by incest, murder, rebellion, and civil war. There is full forgiveness for sin, but no time machine. Forgiveness removes guilt, but not the past, not the act, not its many consequences. If we

thought how much we are going to pay in the long run, to obtain what sin will give us in the short-term, we would see it as a bad deal, a loss every time. Years later, when Absalom is stealing the kingdom, and David's home is torn apart, and his wives are harmed, would he then look back on his night with Bathsheba and think it worth it? Would he then think it worth it to have despatched one of his men?

⁷ Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.

⁸ For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. (Gal. 6:7-8)

Flee from sin while you have the chance. Should you sin, keep short accounts with God, confess and forsake immediately. Uncover to the only One who can and should cover it, with His own blood.