

Called to Clean Up

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[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

The narrator begins the story begins with great drama: "It happened late one afternoon..." The scandal that rocked the nation, the turning point in David's life, happened late one afternoon. It is as if to say it was just another ordinary day when David just happened to sin, thinking it wasn't much.

We are also told that it was a spring afternoon, "the time when kings go out to battle." But David sent Joab his commander to fight his battles for him, while the king remained in Jerusalem. So David was not where he was supposed to be. At least 50 percent of resisting temptation is a matter of geography. When you're not in the right places, it is hard to live righteously.

David has changed dramatically since the time we began this series of sermons. No longer are we looking at the eager young shepherd who had once heard the prophet Samuel say, "Thou art the one who will someday become God's holy king. Thou, David, thou art the one." David has been king for quite a while now. But he's only fifty years old and has too much life left after achieving his dreams. That's a dangerous stage of life.

Late one afternoon he rises from a nap and takes a walk on the roof of his palace. There he sees all the signs of his success. The nation has been united, their enemies are on the run, Jerusalem is established, the economy is flourishing, and the one-time shepherd boy is now living in a palace. But David has not spoken of God for a while. It happened late one afternoon because David was ready for it to happen. When you get to the afternoon stages of life, you are so vulnerable to the destruction of everything you spent the first part of your life building. Especially if God is not a part of the text.

While on the rooftop, David saw a woman bathing who we are told was "very beautiful." He inquired about her and was told, "That is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah." It was another way of saying, "David, this is somebody's daughter, somebody's wife. David, this woman is important to somebody." But David doesn't care about that. For that matter, he doesn't really care about Bathsheba. There is no courting or long, tender conversations. Be clear: This is not a love story. It's a story of lust. That's because the theme of David's own story has shifted from receiving God gifts to taking what he wants.

The events happen very quickly. He sends for her, she comes, and goes back home the next morning. There is no speech and no rationalization. We aren't even given any dialogue, except for Bathsheba's three words that come a little later. "I am pregnant." With that simple message, David's whole world is threatened. So the cover-up begins.

David sends for Uriah, Bathsheba's husband who was fighting on the battlefields. They chat a little about how well the war is going. Then David says, "Hey, it's late. Why don't you go home and spend some time with the Mrs.?" Power offers us the illusion of control, allowing us to think that if we just send people where we want them, we can send our problems away. The verb "to send" is used seven times in the first six verses. David had sent for Bathsheba, then he sent for her husband and tried to send him home. But Uriah was the original Marine who believed it wasn't right to go to his wife when his duty and his comrades were still on the battlefield. So he slept at the door of his king's palace.

Plan B: The next night David tried to get Uriah drunk and then sent him again to Bathsheba. But as is typical of David, he overdid it. He gave Uriah too much to drink so he passed out on the King's sofa.

Plan C: By the next morning David has gone crazy with resolve to do damage control. There was only one thing left to do. He sent Uriah back to battle with sealed instructions for his commander Joab. When Joab opened the letter he read, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting and then draw back from him so that he might be struck down and die." There was a period of mourning. But as soon as it was respectable, the king sent for Bathsheba. She became his wife and gave birth to a son. It cost a lot, but at last the truth was covered.

Sin is what we do when we cover the truth and choose to believe a lie. It's the same lie we heard first in the Garden of Eden. It's our favorite lie that claims we are so smart and capable we can take what we want. This is why confession is so hard for us. Confession is nothing more, or less, than telling the truth. Most of us aren't good at telling the truth because we don't have the training for it. What we are taught is how to be good managers. We manage sin by trying to fix what we have broken, by running away from our sin or denying it, or by manipulating the truth and people's lives as if we were God. But as this tragedy reveals, the only way we can manage sin is with more sin. Eventually we get so deep into sin we don't know how to get out, until in his mercy, God comes looking for us.

Finally, God reasserts himself into the narrative refusing to stay out of David's story any longer. With such poetry the narrator tells us that now it is God who sends someone to David. An old prophet named Nathan comes for a visit and tells David a sad little story. "There was a rich man who had many flocks and herds of sheep, and a poor man who had only a pet lamb that grew up with his children. It used to drink from the poor shepherd's cup, and slept at night right next to its master. One day the rich man was throwing a party. Refusing to kill one of his own sheep, he stole the poor man's pet lamb, killed it, and served it for dinner." The shepherd in David came alive, and he became furious and demanded, "The man who has done this deserves to die."

Nathan pointed his bony finger right at the King's nose and said, "Thou art the one." Remembering the last time he heard those words from Samuel when he was a boy, remembering how far he has fallen from God's dream for his life, David at last hung his head and said, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Notice, David isn't worried about the political implications of this scandal. He doesn't give it to his spin doctors. He doesn't seem worried about his career. He's done with that. Having confronted the truth about his sin, what David is worried about is that he has hurt his relationship with God. What is your greatest fear if the truth was known about your sin? That it would embarrass you and hurt your future? Or that it would hurt your relationship with God? Well, it is already doing that.

Frederick Beuchner has written, "To confess your sin to God is not to tell him anything he doesn't already know. Until you confess it, however, it is the abyss between you. But once you confess your sin, it becomes the bridge." One of the goals of worship is to help you find the bridge between you and God. That is why we begin each worship with a prayer of confession -- with telling the truth. We do not dare come into the house of the Lord looking for a word of hope without first confessing that we have been playing god all week.

Every prayer of confession sticks a bony finger at our souls and says, "You liar! Here you worship God, but all week you kept telling yourself you were a god." The problem isn't with them. The problem is with you and me. "Thou art the one who told yourself the lie that you take what you want, and live without the mercy of God."

The reason we confront you with that hard truth is not because we want to hurt you. You've already done that to yourself. It's because confession is the way to cross over to the good news of the gospel where we finally hear, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." Jesus is the only bridge to the mercy and forgiveness of God. You cross that bridge by telling the truth.

Having told the truth, David then discovers that God can perform the greatest miracle of all. He can create a clean heart. Psalm 51 gives us a record of David's confession. "Create in me a clean heart O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take away your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing Spirit." This is why David is known as a man after God's own heart. It's not because he was a great king. It is because in the end, he still knew how to ask God for a clean heart. And he knew how to receive it.

As David prays this confession, he is filled with remorse. He prays and fasts throughout the night. This goes on for days. But when the son of David and Bathsheba dies, he knows the judgement of God has been satisfied. He believes he is forgiven, so he gets up, washes his face, eats, worships, and returns to life.

On the cross where the Son of God died, the judgment of God has been satisfied. There may be heartaches that follow as a result of what we have done. There certainly were for David. But from God there isn't more judgment but grace that is waiting for all who tell the truth and believe the greater truth that they are forgiven. Until you accept that grace you will never be able to return to life. When you get caught in a cycle of sin, do not commit the greatest sin of all thinking that you are beyond the grace of God.

Whatever you have done, however far you have fallen from your early potential, there is only one bridge back to God and to the clean heart. It runs right through the cross of Jesus Christ. You remember that story. It happened late one afternoon. The Son of God died, and you were forgiven.

Merciful God, no matter how deep the hole we dig, your grace is always waiting to lift us up to the joy of our salvation. Give us the courage to believe that such wonderful news is true. Amen.