

God Did Not Cancel David

Sunday, July 25, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
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2 Samuel 11:1-15

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and 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." Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."

Today's Old Testament lesson is ugly beyond words. In this vile and sordid event, we see David, the king, and up until then a great man of faith, desiring and taking another man's wife. We see deception as he tries to cover his crime, and all of this leads to murder. What sermon is this meant to inspire? The full story of this event, which ends with David being forgiven and restored, has long been held up as a blueprint of sin, confession and forgiveness, as David did fully repent and find restoration. David is commonly held up as a helpful guide to countless people who have fallen into sin. His guilt before God may have been erased, but the damage caused by that sin was real, devastating, and lasting. What shall we say to this? This morning I offer a few thoughts.

First, it should be pointed out that God did not "cancel" David. We now live in a world of "cancel culture" where people who have committed certain transgressions are condemned by certain media and intellectual leaders, ignored and silenced by the media, and all that is possible is done to see that their memory and former influence upon the world is ignored. Many have erased David for this notable sin. I have heard many people say such things as "Oh, I know about David! He was no great man of faith," and proceed to ignore and denigrate everything having to do with this famous king because of this sin. On the one hand, people's disgust is understandable as his crime was so serious. It can also be said that many who cancel David do so with a sense of moral superiority, and this can be very dangerous. What we must all carefully consider is that God did not cancel David. A full account of his life and service remains in our scriptures. The many psalms which he composed still make up the largest share of the Book of Psalms. It was God's gracious choice that David's witness and memory be very much preserved for us.

One of the great flaws which I find in the cancel culture is its basic assumption that because someone has committed a sin which they deem significant, all the other things which that person has done are then considered invalid. This is foolish. Consider two analogies from the world of sports. I have long been a fan of the New York Giants quarterback Eli Manning and I consider him a great football player. In two seasons he led the Giants through the long road to the Super Bowl and each time went on to beat a highly rated team which most thought would defeat them. In each season, and especially during the championship game he showed amazing calm and ability in the face of tremendous pressure. He was awarded the most valuable player award in each game. Yet if one were to sing Eli's praises too loudly among a crowd of sports writers and commentators there would be a terrible conflict of opinions. You see, Manning's career included many disappointing seasons and poor performances, and many would argue that these shortcomings erase the achievements of those two great seasons. Sports writers tend to be that way and seem to delight in player's failings such that they can only manage to find praise for the very finest of players whose records have the very fewest blemishes. It should also be said that there may be times to erase a person's public memory as their achievements were truly tainted.

Rosie Ruiz won the New York Marathon, but it was also clearly proven that she cheated and took a shortcut! Here the achievement and the misdeed cannot be separated, and the misdeed truly does erase the prize.

On a more serious note, we find in our present day people who would try to silence the voices of our Founding Fathers by pointing out their great sins. Many were slave owners, which has long been seen as a sad tragedy and black mark on our history, and many are going so far as to try to invalidate our constitution to which these men contributed. Lincoln authorized some terrible treatments of the American Indians and for this reason many are trying to cancel him. Slavery and the mistreatment of Native Americans is inexcusable, but does participation in these sins invalidate all the other contributions which so many Americans have made? I think not.

The Bible's telling of David's life and witness presents us with a very real human being. It is worth our attention that the historic records of other ancient civilizations would normally only tell of the great triumphs and virtues of their leaders. The histories which Israel kept were very different for they gave painfully honest reports on the faith and behaviors of their people. One could say that the Bible is a "tell-all" kind of book! There is not a person in the Bible whose faults are not honestly reported. Some find this disappointing as they read the Bible, for we long to find flawless heroes whom we can praise and look up to, but the Bible has no such perfect saints. As a professor of mine said many times, there is only one hero in the Bible, and that is God.

God did not cancel David, and in this preserving of the record of David we find lessons which are of great help to every believer. In this particular, especially sad chapter I find two lessons. First, we are reminded that **power corrupts**. It has been said that the one unarguable truth of history is the wise pronouncement of Lord Acton: *Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. Power, closely related to pride, is at the very root of all sin. It is at the heart of nearly all temptation. Think of the temptation of our Lord in the wilderness. The devil was trying to convince Jesus to turn stones to bread, both for his own relief and the feeding of millions. He tried to convince Jesus to use miraculous powers to dazzle the crowd and gain a large following. He tempted Jesus to seize earthly power and glory. All of these were temptations of power, and Jesus wisely and virtuously refused. Instead Our Lord chose the road of humble obedience—a denial of earthly power!—and chose to walk the road to the Cross. Who of us could have resisted as obediently as did Jesus?

Power is a potent temptation. I have heard Christians tell of their involvements in politics and the temptations of power which it presents. Over time there comes a certain sense that one is above the law and is free to do as they please. Whether it be a matter of ignoring certain government rules or committing adultery, there is that same sense that once one has attained power they can do as they please without consequence. Springtime came, the time when kings go to war, but David began to feel that he was above such requirements. He sought idle time, and that idle time led

his to see something that he wanted, and since he was king, couldn't he have what he wanted?

Christian leaders can fall into great temptation. Some years ago, there were top leaders in the National Council of Churches who fell into adultery, much as David did. It was later reported that they had come to feel that their leadership was so important, and they were doing such noble and significant work that minor rules no longer applied to them. They began to take matters of common morality lightly. A sense of power does that to people. I once heard a man speak his sympathies for the rich kids of the world. While we commonly criticize the rich "spoiled brats" of the world, my friend spoke a word of sympathy which set me to thinking. These young people have so many temptations which ordinary youth do not have. Who of us would keep our ways pure if we had so many opportunities to break the rules and live as we please? Power corrupts.

Let us beware of power in whatever form it may take. May we remember Jesus' humble witness of seeking God's will. That's what much of the Lord's Prayer is all about. How important that we worship daily and come here at least weekly to humble ourselves before God. I have long treasured the words of Agur in the Book of Proverbs which warn against the harmful effects of wealth, which is a kind of power. *Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, "Who is the Lord?" Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.* (Proverbs 30:8-9) Let us be cautious with the power that we do have. In the recent decades many activists within the Church have come to see their mission as that of guiding public policy and gaining political influence and power. While there may be times for the Church to speak up to matters of politics, we must be very careful. Philip Yancey pointed to the wisdom of C.S. Lewis whose words still speak to us today. *C.S. Lewis observed that almost all crimes of Christian history have come about when religion is confused with politics. Politics allures us to trade away grace for power, a temptation the church has often been unable to resist.* Power corrupts. It corrupted David, and it continues to corrupt, and we are wise to beware.

The other great lesson which I find in this tragic reading is that of **the lasting consequences of sin**. The whole story of David's disobedience, his confession and forgiveness is often taught as a detailed study of the nature of sin, of confession and of full restoration. The account from 2 Samuel along with Psalms 32 and 51 which were inspired by this event have been a guide to countless believers who sought to be cleansed of guilt and made new again. Just as David sinned boldly, he also confessed fully and boldly, and to him came a full redemption. In all of this we are presented with a wonderful spiritual guide, but as we rejoice in the lessons of forgiveness which all this teaches, there is often something forgotten in these lessons.

In our excitement over the fullness of God's forgiveness, we can easily forget the real and lasting damage that is caused by our disobedience—by David's and by ours. To

do a full reading of the Bible's account of David we come to see the deep and lasting wounds which this sin caused. Up to this point in David's life we find countless blessings and good things happening to him as well as in the life of this growing nation of Israel. But with David's sin comes a string of problems and tragedies, both in David's family and personal life, and in the nation. David's sin brought death and distrust which continued on. In a few more chapters we read of the sin of David's son Amnon against his half-sister Tamar. He became infatuated with his beautiful half-sister and devised a scheme to be with her alone and then sexually assault her. Where had Amnon learned such selfish, deceptive behavior? His father's witness was certainly no help. Later would come the rebellion led by David's son Absalom. Through all sorts of scheming Absalom overthrew David's government. David fought back, defending his dynasty as was his duty, but in this war his son was killed. As sad as any story in the Bible is the death of Absalom and David's grief. Even in victory over these rebels David cried mightily and lamented loudly, *O Absalom, Absalom, my son, my son. If only I had died instead of you. O Absalom my son! Why did David nearly die from grief? His grief was greatly deepened by his guilt, for he had proven an effective teacher in the arts of sin and deception, and the lesson that David's sin taught Absalom could not be undone. Sin has consequences.*

We must take sin seriously and never presume upon God's grace. Jesus offers a gruesome yet important teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about the danger of sin. *If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.* (Matthew 5:29-30) Jesus is warning us of the great danger and toxicity of sin. Sin should be treated like a cancer and never taken lightly, for it has grim, lasting consequences. This teaching of Jesus does create a tension for the Christian. On the one hand we want to loudly proclaim the power of God's forgiveness, yet in doing so we want to be careful to never take sin lightly as though sin creates a minor stain which can easily and fully be washed away. Our guilt before God can be erased, but the harm done may be enduring. We must remember that purity is not an archaic and obsolete term!

This rather detailed account of David's sin is deeply upsetting, but it is there for our instruction and for a warning. Let us listen and live! These chapters are truly ugly, and they are there for a reason.