

The Story: Sin, Roundabouts, & Michigan Lefts
By Jason Huff
Psalm 51:1-17, Galatians 5:16-6:4a, 2 Samuel 11:27-12:14

Our final reading this morning comes from 2 Samuel 11:27-12:14. Listen now to God's Word. "After the time of mourning [for her husband] was over, David had [Bathsheba] brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the LORD. The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him." David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity." Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own. This is what the LORD says: Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.'" Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.'"

Never before moving to Michigan had I ever had to turn right to go left. But whether it's on Hall or Gratiot or Groesbeck, pretty soon you're going to have to make a Michigan left. The same thing is true of roundabouts. To go left, you have to travel around in a circle the opposite direction from where you want to go. They go against our instinct to take the most direct route possible, but their chief purpose is to stop accidents. If you barrel through a left turn where you aren't supposed to, not only are you breaking the law, you're taking your life into your hands. The only way you can turn left safely is to do what's counter-intuitive and turn right...and sure enough, eventually, you're where you wanted to be.

When I read the second half of the story of David, Michigan lefts are exactly what I thought of. When we left off last year, David was great. He was a man after God's own heart, and God gave him success everywhere he turned, making him king over all Israel. But sadly, David makes some huge mistakes in chapter 12 of *The Story* that lead to major consequences. But David is grieved by his own sins, and his turn back to God cautions us while giving us hope.

So here's a recap. David was on top of the world. God had blessed him and made promises to keep his lineage on Israel's throne forever. His military campaigns were so successful and his commanders so respected that he no longer needed to go out with them. So during a season of battle, David decides to stay home. One night, he can't sleep, goes up on his roof, and sees a beautiful woman bathing. It's Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite, who is out battling for Israel. David sends messengers after her. She comes to the palace and they are intimate. A short time later, news comes – Bathsheba's pregnant.

David has a plan. He sends for Uriah, and when Uriah returns to Jerusalem, David quickly questions him and then tells him to go to his house, hoping to cover his tracks. But Uriah bunks out with the king's servants rather than to enjoy the pleasures of home while his compatriots risk their lives. David gets Uriah drunk, but he still won't go home. When David's scheme fails, he sends word to his commander Joab – put Uriah in the front lines and make sure he dies there. And indeed, Uriah dies by an enemy sword...but his death is on David's head.

For a while, David gets away with it. Once her time of mourning is up, Bathsheba marries David and has their son. Many months pass. Then God sends Nathan the prophet to David, who tells David the story we heard in this morning's Scripture reading. David is outraged by the story of a rich man who stole a poor man's beloved lamb, the only thing of value he had in the world. But suddenly the tables are turned. David is the rich man; Uriah is the poor man; and not only did David steal Uriah's wife, he had Uriah murdered in cold blood.

Nathan proclaims fierce consequences. Calamity will come upon David from within his own house; his wives will be claimed by someone else. Violence will be a constant in his lineage. He will lose the son Bathsheba has borne him. And these things won't be hidden as David tried to hide his sins. In the midst of all this, David confesses. He is guilty. He is the one responsible. In his disgust at himself, he writes Psalm 51, which we heard this morning. His heart becomes right before God. He is humbled by the loss of his son. Yet he worships God and finds freedom from his guilt. He and Bathsheba eventually have another son, Solomon, who God gives the name Jedidiah – which means “loved by the LORD.”

There are still consequences to bear through David's son Absalom. While David deeply loves him, Absalom is determined to wrest control from his father. He manipulates everyone to the point where David is forced to flee from him. Absalom takes David's concubines, fulfilling Nathan's words. And eventually, Absalom dies by Joab's hand, even though David had commanded that no one lay a hand on him. With Absalom's death comes David's return to the throne, and David continues to have a long and prosperous reign. At the end of his life, he hands the throne over to Solomon, who will construct the temple David had longed to see built.

This part of David's story is uncomfortable. It's difficult to see a leader chosen by God, with God's best interests in mind, fall so far. At the same time, God's punishments on David seem harsh to us. But we can learn a great deal from David's fall from grace and his restoration. His story shows us that each sin we commit breeds more sin and more consequences we can only avoid by staying far away from temptation. It also shows us that the way out of the cycle of sin is through confession and genuine repentance.

Sin is a trap that creates more sin as we try to hide what we've done, and with those new sins come new consequences. Because David loved God, it's natural for us to want to read the best of David into this story. Sometimes, Bathsheba has been called a temptress who lured the noble and godly king into sin. But the text doesn't give us that option. Instead, Scripture shows us that David's temptation starts not with lust but with dereliction of duty. He belonged out with the fighting forces, leading his men. Even if his commanders urged him to stay behind, that it was too great a risk for him to appear on the front lines, God was his protector. David knew it from all his previous exploits. There was no reason for David to be back in Jerusalem. What's more, his loyal subjects who looked to him as an example of faithful living, men he wouldn't want to disappoint – they're all out on the field of battle. David has set himself up for failure.

There are several more steps in the process. David is restless, so he goes out on the roof of his palace. There's a sense of pride in this – he's observing all that's his, the kingdom. He also has the tallest house in the city, so he has a view no one else has. Bathsheba has little blame for what David sees. But rather than turning his eyes, he summons her. By the time the evening is finished, not only has he become an adulterer, he has made his servants complicit in his schemes. He's tangled other people in the plot.

When Bathsheba becomes pregnant, sin suddenly shows how it compounds itself. David tries deception to fool Uriah, and when his plan doesn't work, he takes Uriah down. This was especially loathsome because Uriah wasn't an Israelite by birth; he was a Hittite. He chose to become an Israelite; he underwent circumcision to become a part of the community. He believed in the God of Israel. He was loyal to his men and loyal to David. He was above reproach. And once again, David involves his commander Joab in his treachery. Once the first sin is committed, everything spirals out of control. The web of sin grows. And before the story is done, that web entangles David's whole family, and two of his sons die because of it.

David's story shows us we must be diligent to avoid sin at all costs. Often times, we put up road blocks to sins that tempt us. We put content filters on our computers or we have someone else handle the cash so we don't spend it on whatever vice happens to tempt us most. We may go to Weight Watchers or AA. Those are all good things to guard against sin. But if we aren't right with God, if we aren't praying to Him on a regular basis and staying in His Word, if we aren't developing a relationship with Him and asking ourselves with each decision, "What would best honor Christ?", those roadblocks can lure us into a false sense of security. If we aren't right with God, no computer is secure enough, no diet easy enough, no casino too far away for us not to fall into sin. Our goal as Christians is not to say "no" to temptation so much as it is to stay as far away from it as possible. Just like those Michigan lefts, we make a hard right to stay out of harm's way. Only then can we get onto the road God has in mind for us.

It might help for you to think of it this way...every week when we say the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Lead us not into temptation." That's not asking for the strength to say "no." It's asking God to keep us far, far away from temptation. David didn't go from being pure to being an adulterer in one fell swoop; it was a series of steps. In as much as it depends on us, let's make sure that we aren't taking the first step off God's path for us.

Before we move on, I want to briefly touch on what disturbs many of us about this passage – the death of David’s first child with Bathsheba. It seems that God takes out His anger at David’s sin on his son instead. It makes us wonder – when my family or my children suffer, am I somehow to blame?

I want to first point out the uniqueness of David’s situation. David was the religious leader of Israel. David clearly proclaimed himself as a follower of Yahweh in front of God’s enemies. To the Israelites of his day, David was the model of what a follower of the LORD should be. This makes David’s sin all the more devastating. When a pastor or priest today fails, it hurts many other people; it is a blemish on the church that concerns us all. But unlike any pastor today, David wielded influence over every worshipper of Yahweh on the planet. His fall into adultery and murder threatened the entire belief system of God’s people and opened God up to ridicule from the enemies of Israel. When God punished David, the punishment took into account David’s particularly heinous abuse of power and his unique role over Israel.

That still doesn’t explain the death of David’s son. Why did he die because of his father’s sin? We must keep in mind something that David’s early life emphasized – God’s sovereignty. Nothing happens without God’s involvement. God has complete and utter control of life and death and eternity. God formed David’s child in Bathsheba’s womb. God knows that child far better than David or Bathsheba ever did. God holds the eternity of that child in His hands, just as He does the eternity of every one of us. God sometimes allows sin’s consequences to play out so we see the ramifications of our rebellion against Him. But the good news is, God is merciful. He is not malicious. All of our lives are under His control, and we can trust in Him even when we do not completely understand His actions.

I’m going to move on to the second lesson from this morning’s story: the way out of the cycle of sin is through confession and genuine repentance. If David’s descent into sin is a model for us to avoid, then his restoration is a model of how we should act when we depart from God’s ways. First, when he is confronted with this sin, he simply says, “I have sinned against the LORD.” David takes responsibility for his actions. Just as important, he realizes that his sins are not a matter of breaking some man-made moral code. His disobedience has offended God himself. His next step is confession. David fully acknowledges what he has done and how he has broken faith with God. He lays out his guilt before God. In Psalm 51, he describes how his sin is always before him and how he has been a sinner since birth.

David is also grieved over his sin and what it has done to his relationship with God. He knows that it isn’t a sacrifice God wants; God desires him to have a broken and contrite heart. And David begs for restoration. He longs for it. He pleads, “Don’t take your Holy Spirit from me.” David knows that without God, he has nothing; he is nothing. He genuinely turns from his sin. And when he knows he has been forgiven, he shares his joy. In Psalm 32, David talks about how blessed a person is when God forgives his or her sin, and he teaches God’s people to turn to God in repentance.

You can see a pattern here: acknowledgement, confession, grief, repentance, and a request for forgiveness. This moves David from a broken relationship with God to a place of reconciliation. Yet I want to stress not the model itself so much as the genuine nature of David's actions within that model. This is not a magical formula. Without genuine grief over sin, the rest is all window dressing.

We live in a society where we apologize for everything but feel regret about almost nothing. We say we're sorry when we bump into somebody or someone's feelings get hurt. The word "sorry" is everywhere in our culture. But hardly anyone is genuinely sorry for anything! We've cheapened the word. It's become our way to smooth over differences or avoid conflicts. Most things we say "sorry" about are simple accidents. But we rarely experience genuine guilt, where we know in the bottom of our hearts that we've done something that has gotten in the way of our fellowship with God and with other Christians. Continuing our earlier example – if a cop pulls us over and gives us a ticket for turning left at a restricted intersection, we're sorry to get caught and we're sorry we have to face the consequences. But are we sorry we did what we wanted to do? Not at all! And that's the problem we face. In our human nature, we aren't genuinely remorseful for what we do against God, just for the penalty those sins bring.

This is a hard realization for us to make, but it's essential. We sin because we like to. We enjoy sinning. We wouldn't sin if we didn't find it fun! Nobody sins to be miserable! And unless God is working in your heart and transforming your life, you don't regret your sins – only the consequences of them. But here's another truth – genuine guilt and shame are good! Now some people experience false shame and guilt about things that have been done to them, evil things, abusive things, and that kind of guilt and shame is unhelpful. But when we've actually sinned, when we are to blame and have transgressed God's law, feeling guilty about it means that God is still stirring in us! That shame we feel means that He is calling us back to Himself, to reconcile with us. I urge you, if you know you are guilty of sin, if like David you feel the hand of God heavy upon you because of your guilt, turn back to God. Find genuine remorse over what you have done that has broken faith with God, make that hard right away from your sin, and come to Him for forgiveness. And in Jesus Christ, you will find even more. You will find true joy in His love and mercy for you.

We could talk all day about David. There is more we can learn from his story, and I encourage you to come to either of our Bible studies this week to learn more from God's work in David's life. But if there's one thing David shows us, it's this: everyone stumbles and falls into sin...but those who truly believe are grieved by their transgressions and desperately desire reconciliation with the God who offers us His unending grace. If we are willing to follow His directions rather than our own, He will show us back to His straight and narrow path.