

Falling Forward

2 Samuel 10-12

On the night of Jesus' betrayal, we read about two of his disciples who failed him in particularly egregious ways. One was Judas the betrayer who, upon seeing the result of his actions at Jesus' condemnation, succumbed to despair and hung himself. The other was Peter who, standing around a fire outside the high priest's house while Jesus was on trial, in his cowardice denied three times that he even knew Jesus. Peter wept bitterly over his sin, but he did not succumb to despair the way Judas did. He held on long enough to hear the risen Lord ask him, once again standing around a fire, "Simon, do you love me?" And three times, matching every single denial, Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his love for Jesus. And so, some two months or so after that event, when Peter stood before a crowd in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and proclaimed the good news about Jesus, speaking of the promise of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name (Acts 2:38), he spoke about a reality that he himself knew well. The apostle who had been forgiven much had a gospel of forgiveness to proclaim to the world, not as an abstract idea but as a reality that he had tasted personally.

You might put it this way: what distinguishes Peter from Judas is that when Peter fell, he fell forward. He got back up, he repented, he experienced that joy of forgiveness and restoration, and he went on to serve the Lord with a deeper experience of grace. Judas did not. That same contrast is one you could draw between Saul and David. King Saul fell in acts of disobedience to the Lord, and he was cut off. The Spirit of the Lord withdrew from him, an evil spirit came to torment him, and he descended into greater levels of madness and paranoia. In this story, we read of King David's great fall. But unlike Saul, David fell forward. What made the difference between these two kings? Remember the covenant promise of God from 2 Samuel 7. In that covenant, God entered into a father-son relationship with the house of David, a relationship that he never had with Saul. When David fell, he fell as a son of God, into the firm but loving hands of his Father. And because he knew the heart of God toward him, David was able to get back up and serve him again, in contrast to Saul, who only drifted farther and farther from the Lord over time. In the wake of sin and failure, we have the choice to entrust ourselves to the Lord who forgives and restores his children, or we can, like Adam and Eve in the garden, run and hide from him.

If you are holding on to your sin, what hinders you from confessing and repenting of it? Maybe you love your sin too much. Or maybe you are simply morally lazy. Or perhaps it's too embarrassing to deal with. But I would guess that the problem at its root is this: you don't trust the heart of God when it comes to your sin. You can't allow yourself to face the truth of it because you are protecting yourself out of fear that God doesn't want anything to do with you. We who are sons and daughters of God have much to learn from this example. Above all, David teaches us how to repent, and thus how to fall forward. I want us to walk through this story together and reflect on how David's example teaches us this important truth about what it means to be a son or daughter of God. Notice the contours of the story of God's son David in four movements through chapters 10-12.

This story begins in chapter 10 with the account of

1. An anointed son (chapter 10)

I draw this idea by putting together what we read about in chapter 10 with Psalm 2, which begins this way: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, ‘As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’” This psalm speaks of the rebellion of the nations against the Lord’s anointed king, his Son, and of the Lord’s backing of his king in putting down this rebellion and taking ownership of the nations. Second Samuel 10 sounds like a mini-version of that, with David in the role of the anointed king, the son of God whose is opposed by the nations around him.

Chapter 10 begins with the death of King Nahash of the Ammonites and the ascension of his son Hanun to the throne. As an act of courtesy, David sent an official delegation to offer condolences to King Hanun, but instead of receiving them, Hanun humiliated them by shaving off half their beards and by cutting off their garments at the hip. Hanun may have been trying to provoke a conflict in order to try to win some independence from David’s regional control, and in order to aid him in the fight, he hired mercenary forces from Syria in the northeast. Notice how verses 6-8 read: “When the Ammonites saw that they had become a stench to David, the Ammonites sent and hired the Syrians of Beth-rehob, and the Syrians of Zobah, 20,000 foot soldiers, and the king of Maacah with 1,000 men, and the men of Tob, 12,000 men. And when David heard of it, he sent Joab and all the host of the mighty men. And the Ammonites came out and drew up in battle array at the entrance of the gate, and the Syrians of Zobah and of Rehob and the men of Tob and Maacah were by themselves in the open country.” Do you see how the nations rage against the Lord, and against his anointed king?

The battle itself is narrated rather quickly. Joab led David’s forces only to discover that the Ammonites had drawn up for battle on one side, and the Syrian mercenaries were already in place on the other side. So David’s forces were surrounded. Joab decided to post his brother Abishai in charge of forces who would face off against the Ammonites, and Joab himself would lead forces against the Syrians. Note Joab’s words to his brother in verses 11-12: “And he said, ‘If the Syrians are too strong for me, then you shall help me, but if the Ammonites are too strong for you, then I will come and help you. Be of good courage, and let us be courageous for our people, and for the cities of our God, and may the LORD do what seems good to him.’” So the question here is this: what does seem good to the Lord? Will the Lord defend the army, and thus the kingdom, of his anointed son David?

The answer is overwhelmingly yes. Joab’s forces routed the Syrians, and when the Ammonites saw that their allies fled, they retreated into their fortress city. Now the Syrians who fled regrouped to face off against David’s forces again. So how did that work out for them? Verses 15-19 tell us that David soundly defeated them and broke the alliance between the Syrians and Ammonites, subduing Syrian territories to his kingdom in the process. In this miniature picture of Psalm 2, we see a foretaste of the triumph of Jesus, God’s anointed Son, who by his resurrection has been enthroned over the cosmos and will one day come in judgment against all the nations who rage against him.

What we read in chapter 10 is a short account of the Lord's defense of his anointed king. Its purpose in the story is to set the stage for what is to come in chapter 11. David has triumphed over the Syrians, but he has not yet taken on the Ammonites, the original instigators of this fight. That is the context for everything that follows.

So we move on to see that the anointed son becomes

2. An arrogant son (chapter 11)

The story that was told quickly in chapter 10 slows down in chapter 11 and focuses attention on David's arrogant actions the following year. Likely as a result of his success in military and political affairs, David began to think of the kingdom of Israel as *his* personal kingdom, to rule over according to his own desires, rather than the kingdom of the Lord, over which he served as a steward.

After the breaking of the Ammonite-Syrian alliance, David allowed the rainy season of the winter months to pass, as was customary, before sending Joab out with his army to lay siege to the Ammonite city of Rabbah. David remained in Jerusalem, tending to local matters. But one afternoon, after taking a rest on his palace roof (a place to cool down), David was up walking around, and he noticed, either through a window of a house below or in a courtyard, a beautiful woman bathing. And as soon as he saw her, his imagination was inflamed, and in that moment he wanted her more than anything. So he sent to find out who she was, assuming that if she were an unmarried woman he could add her to his collection of wives. David had acquired something of a harem at this point, contrary to the law of Deuteronomy 17:17, so he was used to having a single woman if he wanted her. His arrogance on this point had been trained over the years.

But the report came back to him: "This is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah." Her father Eliam was one of "the thirty" of David's mighty men, which means her grandfather Ahithophel was David's main advisor. But above all, she was married to Uriah the Hittite, one of David's loyal soldiers. God had tolerated (but not approved!) David's polygamy so far, but moving from polygamy to outright adultery—the willful theft of another man's wife—takes the issue to an entirely new level. Although David was charged above all with enforcing the Law of Moses over the kingdom of Israel, here he shows blatant disregard for the Law and proceeds to the fulfillment of his lusts anyway. Hear me when I say this, especially those of you who are young and not yet married: one of the reasons sexual immorality appeals to the desires of our flesh is precisely *because* it is forbidden by God. Many unmarried couples have engaged in sexual activity prior to marriage, only to find that they don't enjoy the marriage bed as much after they are lawfully joined together. Why do you think that is? It's because they enjoyed the thrill of transgressing boundaries, of essentially telling God, "I'll do this my way, thank you very much, and who do you think you are to tell me no?" That's David's mindset here.

According to verse 2, David "saw" this beautiful woman, and then in verse 4 he sent and "took" her, bringing her to his bed where he committed adultery with her. Just like Eve with the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3:6, he *saw* something forbidden that was delightful to his eyes, and he *took* it for himself in complete disregard of what God had commanded. This was a high-handed act of defiance and arrogance.

But actions have consequences. Some time later, Bathsheba sent word to David saying, “I am pregnant.” And we know the child cannot be Uriah’s, because he was with the army laying siege to Rabbah, and Bathsheba had just cleansed herself after her monthly cycle. From here the story proceeds with agonizing steps of escalation as David desperately schemes to cover up his sin. Phase 1 of David’s plan (vv. 6-13) is to get Uriah back home to lie with his wife and deceive him into thinking the child is his. So he calls Uriah back from the siege and peppers him with very general, basic questions that he could have learned from a simple messenger, and then he tells Uriah, “Go home and wash your feet.” David even sent a gift to Uriah’s home, probably a nice meal and some wine as an entrée to a pleasant evening with Bathsheba. But to David’s surprise, Uriah did not go home. He slept at the entrance of the king’s house with the bodyguards. When David asked him why the next day, he showed that his solidarity with his fellow soldiers and his regard for the holiness of the camp of Israel prevented him from enjoying the pleasures of marriage. He was too loyal a soldier. So David proceeded to feast with him the next night in order to get him drunk, but even drunk Uriah retained enough control of his faculties to remain firm in his resolve and not go to his house. David realized Uriah would not take the bait, so he proceeded to phase 2 of his plan (vv. 14-25). Confronted with the choice to expose his own sin and face the consequences or pile murder on top of adultery, David opted for choice B. The tension of the story builds almost to a breaking point when David sends Uriah’s death warrant by his own hand to Joab, commander of the army. Joab’s orders were clear: even though there is no military value in attacking a strong section of the city wall during a siege, Joab was to send Uriah against the most heavily fortified section of the city and then draw back from him, leaving him to die. Joab complied, and in the process left other soldiers to die along with Uriah. We can call them collateral damage to David’s coverup operation. David knew Uriah was trustworthy enough to carry his own death warrant without opening it. And he knew he was courageous enough to fight to the point of death without retreating. And he was right. Uriah the Hittite, one of David’s mighty men, died in a senseless battle against the Ammonites by David’s own command. Joab sent word back to David, knowing that David would be angry about the senseless loss of life if he didn’t know the full context. So he made sure the messenger knew to note in particular to David: “Uriah the Hittite is dead also.” Note the wickedness of David’s response to the messenger in verse 25: “David said to the messenger, ‘Thus shall you say to Joab, ‘Do not let this matter displease you, for the sword devours now one and now another. Strengthen your attack against the city and overthrow it.’ And encourage him.” David had the audacity to attribute Uriah’s death to chance, knowing full well it was his hand that signed the execution order. As commentator Ralph Davis says, “Here is the one who puts Mephibosheth at his table and Uriah in his grave. Welcome to Thugsville.”

David allowed Bathsheba her customary time to mourn, and then he brought her to himself again, this time to become his wife. At this point it looks like David has gotten away with it all. But then the end of verse 27, the only verse to mention the Lord in this chapter, sits there like a landmine: “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.” David’s arrogance is about to meet its match.

Commenting on this chapter, the great Baptist theologian John Gill wrote, ““This is recorded to show what the best of men are, when left to themselves; how strong and prevalent corrupt nature is in regenerate persons, when grace is not in exercise; what need the saints stand in of fresh supplies of grace, to keep them from falling; what caution is necessary to everyone that stands,

lest he fall; and that it becomes us to abstain from all appearance of sin, and whatever leads unto it, and to watch and pray that we enter not into temptation.” No doubt David did not wake up on the morning of the rooftop incident thinking, “I will commit adultery today.” The temptation took him by surprise, and at a time when arrogance had grown up in his heart, he suddenly thought his desires trumped God’s commands, his kingdom trumped God’s kingdom, and his preservation from consequences trumped God’s rule. If there is anything we have to learn from chapter 11, it is to be on guard against arrogance in your heart. Cultivate humility and gratitude before God as armor against the pride and covetousness that led David down this dark road.

With the ominous note at the end of chapter 11 sounding, we might assume David is a dead man walking. But what we find instead in the next chapter is our third movement in the story:

3. A chastened son (12:1-23)

So far in the story we have seen a lot of sending. David *sent* Joab to lay siege to the Ammonites (11:1). David *sent* to inquire about Bathsheba (11:3). He *sent* and took her (11:4). Then she *sent* and told David, “I am pregnant” (11:6). David *sent* a letter by Uriah to Joab (11:14). Joab *sent* and told David the news about the fighting (11:18). David *sent* and brought Bathsheba to his house to become his wife (11:27). Finally, in 12:1, it is the Lord’s turn to do the sending: “And the LORD sent Nathan to David.” I want you to hear the incredible grace of God in those words. When David’s arrogance led him to do the unimaginable, the Lord did not strike him dead or cut him off. He sent his Word to him through his prophet, a word of rebuke summoning David to repentance. It was time for Father and son to have a talk.

And notice the gracious way Nathan slips past David’s defenses in order to bring the Word of God to bear on his heart. We read in verses 1-6: “And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, ‘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 had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.’” Nathan does not come at David head on, giving David the opportunity to put up his defenses. He slips past his defenses and lays a trap. Let us see him spring the trap in verses 5 and following: “Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, ‘As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.’ Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. And I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. 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.’ Thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of 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. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.’”

Confronted head on with the horror of his sin, we come to the turning point of the story in verse 13: “David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’” Now you might think, “David, you have sinned against Bathsheba, her father Eliam, her grandfather Ahithophel, and above all, you have sinned against your loyal servant Uriah.” But David cuts through all that and comes to the heart of the issue. For all sin is ultimately against the Lord. That is what makes it sin, for God himself is the very standard of all that is right, true, and good. To harm another person through adultery and murder is to defile and attack the image of God. It is God himself who is most offended by our sin, and with this simple, direct sentence, David acknowledges openly the truth about what he has done. There is no nuancing, “Well, in a moment of weakness I was caught off guard.” There is no excusing, “Well, I have been under a lot of stress lately with the war against the Ammonites, and so I haven’t been myself lately.” There is no mitigating, “Well, Bathsheba should have known she was bathing in a place where I could see her, so she shares at least part of the blame for how this whole ordeal unfolded.” With a simple acknowledgement of his guilt before the Lord, David owns his sin, and he rightly owns that the most offended party is God. And in doing so, he teaches us that repentance begins by facing honestly the gravity of our own sin and God’s hatred of it.

It may be that some of you here today struggle with sinful actions because you have never honestly faced the root of sin in your own heart. Maybe you keep falling into pornography because you feel arrogant and entitled to have sexual pleasure whenever and however you want it. Maybe you struggle with addiction to alcohol because you have never dealt with the pain and bitterness of your past, and all you know to do is medicate it. Maybe you refuse to commit to church membership, or if you are a member, you refuse to open your heart and life to your brothers and sisters because you have been hurt in the past, and your response has been to live in the fear of man ever since instead of in life-giving obedience to God. Or maybe you refuse to seek reconciliation with someone else because in your pride you take some perverse pleasure in being offended, and the thought of letting that go seems too high a price to pay for obedience to God. And it may be the case that you have never laid your heart bare before the Lord in open acknowledgement of your sin because you don’t see honesty, confession, and repentance as a pathway of hope. And I would tell you, based on this story and the rest of the teaching of the Bible, that your unwillingness to do so is because you don’t really know the heart of God. You have trouble accepting the truth that God beckons you to bare your heart to him so that you can fall forward in his grace, not so that he can pounce on you in wrath.

The word David receives as a result of his confession is indeed a word of grace. Verses 13-14 read, “And Nathan said to David, ‘The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child who is born to you shall die.’” Yes, there are consequences for David’s sin. Very painful consequences. But David is still a son of God, and the consequences come upon him, not as wrath, but as fatherly discipline that humbles him and draw him back to the Lord. In fulfillment of his word, the Lord struck David’s son born to Bathsheba with an illness. Note verse 16: “David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground.” David has fallen from the heights of his roof, where he saw and took whatever he wanted, to now being on his face on the ground before the Lord in humble dependence. That is falling forward.

But it was not the Lord's will to heal this child. For seven days David fasted and prayed, but on the seventh day the child died. David's servants were afraid to tell him, imagining the harm he might do to himself upon receiving the bad news. But David discerned what had happened from the way they were acting, and he pulled the truth out of them: his son was dead. Much to their surprise, he got up, washed himself off, went before the Lord to worship, and then asked for food to be brought to him. Let's pick up the story in verse 21: "Then his servants said to him, 'What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food.' He said, 'While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.'" These are the words of a formerly arrogant man now brought under the rod of discipline. He is a broken man, but he is a chastened son who still knows and trusts the heart of his Father.

The greatest blessing you can receive from the Lord in your sin is for him to break you. For it is only in being broken over our sin that we may receive the grace Jesus pronounced in Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Poverty of spirit is a recognition of your own spiritual bankruptcy that leads you to complete dependence on the grace of God. If, through the painful act of facing your own sin directly, you are broken before the Lord to confess it and repent of it, then you have indeed fallen forward into the arms of a loving and gracious Father. What distinguishes a true believer from an unbeliever is not the absence of sin. It is what we do with our sin. Do we avoid it, push it aside, minimize it, and hide it in a vain attempt to justify ourselves? Or do we bring it out before the Lord because we know his heart of grace to the poor in spirit? That is the difference between Heaven and Hell.

And so, once David's sin has been dealt with, we come to the fourth movement of this story:

4. A triumphant son (12:24-31)

Once David has been chastened by the loving discipline of the Lord, he is prepared to complete the task of war against the Ammonites. Joab's siege of the city of Rabbah reached a critical point when he got control of the water supply, which meant the city could not withstand much longer. So he sent word to David, and the account ends in verses 29-31: "So David gathered all the people together and went to Rabbah and fought against it and took it. And he took the crown of their king from his head. The weight of it was a talent of gold, and in it was a precious stone, and it was placed on David's head. And he brought out the spoil of the city, a very great amount. And he brought out the people who were in it and set them to labor with saws and iron picks and iron axes and made them toil at the brick kilns. And thus he did to all the cities of the Ammonites. Then David and all the people returned to Jerusalem." The nations raged against the Lord's anointed, and now, chastened from his former arrogance, the anointed son of God triumphs over the enemies who rebelled against him.

But I skipped over two verses that come just before that account. Notice what happens in the wake of the death of David's son in verses 24-25: "Then David comforted his wife, Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her, and she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon. And the LORD loved him and sent a message by Nathan the prophet. So he called his name Jedidiah, because of the LORD." And from this originally illicit union God brought forth the next king of Israel and ancestor of the Messiah, Solomon, beloved by the Lord. The first word the Lord "sent"

to David in this story was one of rebuke. The second word he “sent” was a message of assurance that David’s son was also God’s son, in fulfillment of God’s covenant promise in 2 Samuel 7:14. What David intended for evil, God intended for good. Falling forward, indeed.

Have you ever wondered what David’s life was like during those nine months between his terrible sins and his confrontation by Nathan the prophet that led to his repentance? We don’t have to wonder. David himself tells us in Psalm 32:3-4: “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.” And then what happened? Verse 5 tells us: “I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” David fell forward because he was a son of God. In his sin, he could trust the heart of his Father with honesty, confession, repentance, and the hope of grace. He did not fall into despair like Saul his predecessor. He fell into the arms of the God who was pledged to him by covenant. And so must we, trusting that because of the perfect obedience, atoning death, and resurrection of the greater Son of David, we have no reason to hide our sin. Christ has taken it upon himself, and trying to hide from the truth about our sin implicitly denies the sufficiency of his death for us.

David fell a broken man who would experience consequences for the rest of his life. We will see his family torn apart and his kingdom nearly taken from him. In coming chapters we will see his tears pour out in lament over the coming death of another son. Like Jacob who wrestled with God and was never the same again, you might say that David had an encounter with God that broke him and left him limping for the rest of his life. But it is far better to limp your way toward Heaven than to run toward Hell. Amen.