

Sermon Given by

Tim Howles

At the Evening Service on 18th July 2010

2 Samuel 12 - "Grace Greater Than All Our Sin"

Over the recent few weeks I gather you've been reading the story of David in the book of 2 Samuel. And last week in chapter 11 you came to the real 'low-point' of the story, right? First of all, David has an affair with Bathsheeba and gets her pregnant. Then, when he realises he's about to get found out, he has her husband Uriah killed in battle to keep it secret. So first he commits adultery: then he commits murder. And finally, when he's done all that, he goes back to his palace, rubs his hands together, and feels pretty pleased that he's got himself out of a sticky situation. No remorse. No awareness of what he's done. And that's chapter 11!

So what happens next? Well, chapter 11 isn't the end of the story! Because in chapter 12, God intervenes. Do you know there was very little reference to God in chapter 11, was there? But in this chapter, God intervenes. And He takes David on a journey of self-discovery. In fact, God does three things to David in this chapter, and we're going to look at these three things in turn and consider what we can learn from them. So after the terrible sins that David committed in chapter 11, what does God do to David in this chapter? First, He breaks him down. Then, He re-arranges him. And finally, He brings him back up again.

So that's the journey of self-discovery that God takes David through in chapter 12. He breaks David down; then He re-arranges him, and then finally He brings him back up again.

1. God breaks David down

Now, in order to get at this, can I start by asking you a question? Why did David do all those things in chapter 11? After all, David's a pretty good guy, right? He's a great king. He's a man of justice and integrity. He's a man of honour on the battle-field. He's a man that can demonstrate great love and compassion for people. He's a man of feeling and insight – a poet (don't forget, he's the man who wrote so many of the Psalms)! And most of all, he's a man who loved God; in fact, earlier in the story he's called a man 'after God's own heart'. There's so much to admire about this man David, don't you agree? And yet here he is at the start of chapter 12, having committed all these terrible sins, with apparently no remorse or self-awareness whatsoever. How could David have done this? What's been going on? Well, I think what's happened is that David has rationalised his behaviour. Have you ever had that experience? We've done something that we know was wrong. And yet we rationalise it to ourselves. We build up a kind of self-defence in our mind and we block out the memory of what we did. Have you ever done that? Well, I think that's what David had done to himself. And that explains why he's living in such blissful ignorance at the start of chapter 12 – in spite of everything he's done. And so God has to send a message to David that breaks down those self-defences. Can you have a look at verse 1? Look at what happens right at the beginning of this chapter: **'The Lord sent Nathan to David.'** Nathan is the instrument that God is going to use to break down David's defences. So what happens? Well, Nathan tells David a story. It's a very simple story about two men: one man who was rich and another man who was poor. The rich man had lots of sheep and cattle; and the poor man had only one lamb in the whole world. One day, the rich man had a guest, so he nips down the road, sneaks into the field of the poor man, and grabs his lamb, because he can't be bothered to provide one of his own. And that's it! That's the whole story!

And David's reaction to that story is very interesting. In fact, David's reaction tells us a lot about what was going on in his head. Can you see what David's reaction is in verse 5? It says: **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"**. Now, when you read that, doesn't it strike you as a little odd? Doesn't David's reaction strike you as a little over-the-top? I mean: is this a balanced reaction? Because look: David goes crazy! He '**burned with anger against the man**'. He swore an oath to the Lord. He jumps out of his throne in front of Nathan and says: '**the man who did this deserves to die**'.

But: it's just a story! It's just a story! That's so obvious! In fact, one commentator says this about David's reaction: 'Given the patently literary character of Nathan's tale, which would have been transparent to anyone native to ancient Hebrew culture, it's a little puzzling that David should so precipitously take the tale as a report of fact requiring capital judicial action.' So what's going on? Why does David react with such anger when he hears this story? Well, don't you see, David's conscience is waking up. And God is using this story to break down David's self-defences. Because in verse 7, Nathan turns around to David and says: 'OK, you think what that rich man did was despicable. You got all indignant and hot-under-the-collar about it. Well listen to this: you are the man!' And suddenly, David realises. He wakes up. It's as if God has taken a big mallet and whacked David over the head. And so David says those amazing words that we read in verse 13: **Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord"**. And for the first time in a long while, David really means what he says. The story broke through to him. And only now can he see the magnitude of the sins that he's committed. Have you ever had that experience yourself? You've know there's some sin or broken relationship in your life that you've rationalised away. You're living as if nothing is wrong. Well one day, God may send somebody or something into your life to say: 'you are the man!' He'll break down your defences. And if He does that to you, please remember: it's a mark of his love. God breaks David down in this way because he wants to get through that hard exterior to teach him a lesson that was crucial for the rest of his life. So that's the first thing: God breaks David down. But that's not it! So second:

2. God re-arranges David

Once he had 'broken through' David, God has something else to teach him – and it's very, very important. Have a look at verse 14, where the Lord says: **Because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt, the son born to you will die**. So God tells David that his son (the son he had through that affair with Bathsheeba) is going to die. And then look what happens from verse 13: **After Nathan had gone home, the Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill. David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them. On the seventh day the child died**. Now, what's your reaction to that? If you're anything like me, you'll be thinking: 'What! What's God doing to David? The man said sorry for what he did: now his son is dying! Is that fair? Is that just? What's going on?' Well, it's a hard question to answer, isn't it? But I think that through this very sad episode, God is re-arranging something in David's character. And the thing that God wants to re-arrange through this terrible situation is the very same thing that led to his sin in chapter 11. Let me explain what I mean. Can you have a look at verse 7? This is what Nathan says to David to explain why all this is happening. Nathan says: **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. Do you see the key word there, as God spells out why David has done what he's done? It's the word 'despise'. Through all the terrible sins that he was committing in chapter 11, the worst thing David was doing was 'despising' God himself.

Now, that word translated 'despise' is the antonym of (the opposite of) the word for 'glory'. But what does 'glory' mean? The word 'glory' has a sense of 'heaviness'. So to treat God with 'glory' is to give him the greatest 'weight' in your life: to give him the priority in what you think, say, and do. But to 'despise' God is the exact opposite of that. It's to treat him 'lightly'. It's to give your priorities to somebody or something else, and not to God. So do you see what God's saying to David? He's showing David that, through all the sins he committed in chapter 11, the greatest of them all was the he took God lightly. That's why David responds in verse 13 by saying: **'I have sinned against the Lord'**. And in Psalm 51, he says something similar: **'Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight'**. And that's why the Lord then decides to take David's son. You see, this child had become very precious to David. And God wanted to show David that, ultimately, if he was going to avoid the destruction he had wreaked in chapter 11, his priorities would have to be re-arranged. Does that sound harsh? Well, have a look at David's reaction in verse 15: **After Nathan had gone home, the Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill. David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground.** When the child got sick, the pain of it was so great that it literally pushed David down to the floor. Have you ever experienced grief like that?

Can I tell you a true story? One autumn morning nearly 10 years ago, mother-of-two Kristin Breitweiser had just woken up at her home in New York State when she received a phone-call from her husband. Jim, her husband, worked on the 94th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Centre. The time was 08.51 am. By the tone of his voice, she knew that something was up, and she was immediately alarmed. He told her that he'd seen something happen in the other tower; but that she was not to worry, that he was OK, that it wasn't his building, and that he loved her. She didn't know what he was talking about. But whilst he was still on the line, she switched on the TV in her kitchen, and seconds later watched live footage of the second plane crashing into the North Tower, and the building exploding. And here's what she said: 'When I saw it, I knew right away. And a gut-wrenching, disbelieving moment of terror struck me inside. I just said: "My God, he is gone". And I fell to the floor and could not get up again.' That's what David experiences as he realises his child is dying. The pain of it is so great that he falls to the floor in a 'gut-wrenching, disbelieving moment of terror', just like that woman on the morning of 9/11. And he can't get up. Although I think it's hard to understand why He does it this way, God's showing David something about his life that he needs to re-arrange. He's showing David something in his life that he's invested more hope and expectation in than God. He's showing David something in his life that he loves more than God. Because when the child was sick, David's whole world threatened to come crashing down. That's why he fell to the floor when the child became sick: he fell to the floor, because he'd been leaning on him so much. And, although it is very hard for us to understand, in this terrible episode I think God is showing his love to David. He's saying to him: David, all those things you did in chapter 11 flowed out of a heart that was treating Me too lightly. And I know you've repented of that. But David, don't you see, you're about to do the same thing again. This child is taking pride of place in your life again. And so because I love you, I'm going to take this child's life. And the grief will push you down to the ground for a time. But then you'll see why. I'm re-arranging your heart so that you'll trust Me more.

Do you see the paradox? In this chapter, God graciously gives David the most precious thing in the world by taking away the thing David thought was the most precious. He gives him a short period of grief, but he teaches David something that will be a blessing for the rest of his life.

Now what can we learn from this? Well, David isn't the only one to lose a son in the Bible, is he? Hundreds of years later, God gave His own Son to die on the cross. And in 1 John chapter 4 we read: ***'This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins'***. David lost his son, but it taught him to re-arrange his priorities and to give God the glory in all things. But if you're a Christian, you know that God gave His Son so that our priorities could be re-arranged, and so that we can give God glory in all things. Isn't that an amazing privilege? Isn't that something to praise God for as we read this story? And that leads to the third point, very briefly, to finish off. God breaks David down; then he re-arranges him. But finally, there's a wonderful end to this journey:

3. God brings David back up again

I love this bit! Can you have a look at verse 19? ***David noticed that his servants were whispering among themselves and he realized the child was dead. "Is the child dead?" he asked. 'Yes', they replied, 'he is dead.' Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate.*** So remember: David has been knocked down to the floor in terrible grief for his child. But then look what happens! He gets up off the floor, he washes, and he eats (in other words, he starts to act normally again). And then he goes to the Temple and he worships the Lord. What's going on? The Lord's bringing David back up again. And I think we see this in three small but significant ways. First, look at what David says in verse 22: ***'While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.'*** David realises that although he has lost his child, he will one day see him again. Now, when you have surgery, how do you feel? You feel very sore for a few days, right? And David had undergone surgery in his life. The Lord had been re-arranging some things deep in David's heart. But although he's sore, he's not without hope. He knows that God has intended all this ultimately for his blessing, not for his destruction. He trusts the Lord! And he trusts that, in the light of eternity, this brief moment of 'surgery' in his own life will have meaning and purpose – it will heal something in his heart.

Do you remember what Paul wrote when he went through a similar time of 'surgery' in his own life? He wrote this: ***'our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all'***. I don't want to downplay the pain that David goes through. And I'm not saying this is always how the Lord will deal with his people. But look: some years later, when all this pain had subsided, David wrote the following beautiful words to express himself more clearly in Psalm 16: ***I know that you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*** David trusts the Lord for his son's life. That's the first clue. But here's the second. Look at what happens in verse 24: ***Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and he went to her and lay with her. She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon. The Lord loved him; and because the Lord loved him, he sent word through Nathan the prophet to name him Jedidiah.*** David and Bathsheeba have a baby and call him Solomon. But God says to David: 'listen, although his name is Solomon, I have another name for him. I'm giving him the name 'Jedidiah', which means: God is my friend.'

And this was the child through whom all the promises of God came true. Don't you think it must have been a wonderful reminder to David for the rest of his life. When he remembered the death of his son, he would have looked down at Solomon, the child of promise, and said to himself: God is my friend.

And the third and final clue we can only touch on. Right at the end of the chapter, David's army wins a series of battles against the Ammonites. And that's another indication that this painful period for David was over, and his kingdom would now be blessed. So God took David through a painful journey – very painful. But look: he brought him back up again. He healed him.

But let me wrap-up and conclude with a brief challenge to all of us – myself included. God takes David on a journey in chapter 12. He broke down the self-defences that David had built up. He showed David that he'd been proud and that he hadn't put the Lord first in his life – that's what led to him messing up his own life and the lives of many people around him in chapter 11. But God intervened in David's life. He re-arranged his priorities. He taught him that, if he seeks first the kingdom of God, then everything else in his life would fall into place. And David learnt that lesson, and by the end of the chapter he was able to get up again off the ground, and rejoice in the grace and the blessing of God once again, a changed man. Have you realised that yet? Have you taken a good, hard look at your own life recently? Where are your idols? Where are the things that you're leaning on to give you hope, joy and meaning in this world? One day, maybe God will take them away, and you'll fall to the floor, just like David did.

But if you have the hope of the Gospel, if you know in your heart that God gave his own Son so that we could be spared, then you'll be able to take that as 'surgery', and not as punishment. And when it's over, you'll be able to get off the floor, you'll be able to worship the name of the Lord, and you'll know that there's nothing else in the world that's as glorious, as enduring, or as joyful as knowing Him, and being known by Him. Do you remember what David said in Psalm 16: ***'I know that you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.'***

May that be true for every one of us here who knows the name of Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that we too can be healed, just like David.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)