

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for November 16: When tangled in sin

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The bigger they are, the harder they fall, or so we're told. Consider the one-sided battle between David and Goliath. I easily can imagine that when the shepherd boy brought down Goliath with one of his sling stones, the ground around the giant shook so hard as he hit it that the vibration could be felt for quite a distance.

It's not just physical giants who fall; spiritual "giants" sometimes do it, too. And when they do, they hit hard—so hard that the spiritual shock waves can reverberate across a great distance and over a long period of time.

By all accounts, David was a spiritual titan. Though certainly not morally perfect, he nonetheless was a man to be admired for his deep devotion to God and his desire to honor the Lord through his life and leadership. God himself had said about David that he was a man after his own heart.

But somewhere along the path, David's heart turned away from God and toward his own personal gratification. He fell. In fact, he fell so far and so hard that it almost is beyond our ability to comprehend how such a thing could happen.

2 Samuel 11 sets the stage for the tragic story by telling us that during a certain springtime David sent his army to fight the Ammonites (11:1). David did not join his men in battle, but chose to remain in Jerusalem (a decision for which he should not be faulted, as he already had proven his mettle on the battlefield and did not needlessly have to place himself as Israel's leader in harm's way).

One evening, David could not sleep and went up to the roof of his palace for a walk and a breath of fresh air. From that vantage point, he was able to see—possibly by looking down into an enclosed outdoor courtyard of a nearby house—a beautiful woman in the act of bathing.

Upon making inquiries, David learned the woman's name was Bathsheba and she was the wife of one of his most valiant and trusted soldiers, a man named Uriah (23:39).

The fact that Bathsheba was married apparently applied no brakes to David's lust, and so the king blatantly ignored God's commandments against adultery. He sent for Bathsheba and had her brought to the palace, where he slept with her (11:2-4).

What David might have thought was a simple and harmless indiscretion rapidly became a complicated problem when Bathsheba informed the king their encounter had resulted in pregnancy (v. 5). David knew this was a serious matter and not merely an occasion of royal embarrassment, since the levitical code required the death penalty for the sin of adultery (Leviticus 20:10).

Probably in a state of near panic, David tried to cover his tracks. He first had Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, brought home from the battlefield, intending to have him spend time with his wife and lead him to believe that the child Bathsheba was carrying was his (vv. 6-13). When that plan was unsuccessful, David piled sin upon sin: He sent a written message to his battlefield commander, a man named Joab, and instructed him to set Uriah up to be killed in battle so that David could marry Bathsheba and thus conceal his adulterous affair with her (vv. 14-15).

In one of the horrible ironies of this sordid story, it was Uriah himself who was handed the sealed letter which contained his own death warrant, to carry to Joab.

David's murderous plan succeeded, and Uriah died in battle. David then married Bathsheba and brought her into the palace, where in the course of time she gave birth to a son (vv. 16-27). "All is well," David must have thought. "It was close there for a while, but I got away with it."

"But the thing David had done displeased the Lord" (11:27). Chapter 12 describes how God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David about his sin.

Scripture is silent about how Nathan knew about what the king had done; he might have become aware from human sources about David's shameful acts, or perhaps God revealed the facts to him. However Nathan might have learned about the matter, he and David already had a relationship in which David trusted the prophet and relied on his spiritual counsel (2 Samuel 7:1-17), and so it is not surprising he would be the one chosen by the Lord for this unpleasant task.

Nathan did not immediately make his accusation against David, but rather approached the issue in a roundabout manner. He told David a story about a wealthy and powerful man who stole the beloved lamb of his poor neighbor (12:1-4). Couched in those third-person terms, David clearly saw the greed and treachery of the powerful man, and he "burned with anger against the man" (v. 5). Only then did Nathan drop his bombshell: "You are the man!" (v. 7).

The anger David had felt toward the fictitious man in Nathan's story was but a dim shadow of God's own anger over what David had done. With heart-crushing specificity, Nathan told the king exactly how God felt about his sins, and what the awful repercussions of those acts would be (vv. 7-12).

There was no hiding place for David; a spiritual mirror was being held up and he was being forced to look into it. Faced with the truth, David had no choice but to admit his guilt.

Actually, looking back at that last sentence, I realize that it is not exactly the truth. What I wrote was that David had no choice but to admit his guilt; but strictly speaking he did have a choice. There was nothing outside of himself which forced him to acknowledge his crimes against God and man.

The reason this is important is that repentance always is a choice each of us is given the opportunity to make. And “choice” is the operative word, because God will never force us to confess our sins and come to him for grace and forgiveness.

There is something very deep and fundamental in the act of repentance, which has to do with how we see ourselves when we look into the spiritual mirror. This fact reveals an odd inconsistency which we all tend to exhibit.

The inconsistency is this: We all agree, in principle, that we are sinners. We fully believe and freely acknowledge the truth of Romans 3:23, and no one in his right mind would dare to suggest he is perfect.

But here’s the curious thing: If any of us gets pinned down on any particular act of sin, that can be a different matter. That’s when we start falling back on our defense mechanisms of denial, justification and/or blaming others for what we have done. How we see our specific actions in our own minds will determine whether or not we will make the wise choice to repent and seek forgiveness.

David was given the opportunity to see his actions as God saw them, and repent of those actions; and he made his choice wisely. “David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord’” (v. 13).

The paucity of words in David’s brief confession cannot even begin to convey the depth of his inner anguish. Psalm 51, penned by David while in the throes of his spiritual grief, gives us a glimpse into a heart which was broken by God.

The repercussions of David's sin had begun, and would haunt David—and David's kingdom—for the rest of his life (vv. 10-12). But David himself experienced God's grace and forgiveness (v. 13).

God's forgiveness of our sins is an act of his grace toward us. If we are unwilling to admit we have sinned, we essentially are saying, "I don't need grace—I haven't done anything that requires grace!"

And right at this very point we discover one of those qualities which made David a man after God's own heart: He knew how—and when—to repent.