

March 5, 2025  
Ash Wednesday

Pastor Prieue  
Psalm 51:1-2

*For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.”*

### *Realizing Our Need for Repentance*

**1) How could David?** How could David do what he did? Isn't that the question that jumps into your mind as you heard this story read before? It's one of the most terrifying accounts maybe in all of Scripture for this reason, because it shows how far a sinner can fall. And the question is really twofold, one about his actions, "How could David do what did?" And the other about his response, "How could David ask for what he asked for?"

Think about who we are talking about? This is David, the eighth son of Jesse. God had passed over the other seven sons to get to him, because God looked not at appearance but at the heart, and this was a man after God's own heart, as the Scriptures say. This was bold David, once the teenager who had slain the giant Goliath who dared to defy the Lord God. When all the soldiers of Israel cowered in fear, David went out fearlessly with nothing but a sling and stone, and the power of the Lord God with him. And after that, he valiantly led the armies of Israel and his famous mighty men to many victories so that people sang songs of the 10,000's he had slain.

As strong and fierce as he was, slaying both lion and bear out in the pasture, and giant and army on the battlefield, this was also tender-hearted David. He was once conscience stricken because he had cut off a little piece of the corner of the garment of the Lord's anointed, King Saul, who was trying to hunt him down and kill him. This is David whose friendship with Jonathan was inseparable, and David who made sure to take care of Jonathan's son who had crippled feet after Jonathan died. This is also the David whom God inspired to write those most blessed and beautiful words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. And this is David to whom God had given the promise that the kingdom of his Son would endure forever.

How could that David be the David in this story, the one who took the spring off of work to play hooky. We find him lounging around in the palace when he should off leading his army in battle, including Uriah the Hittite, one of his loyal mighty men. That's when idleness becomes the devil's workshop. One evening as he's walking around on the roof of the palace, he sees Bathsheba. She's doing her purification process like she's supposed to. But he doesn't restrain himself with words like that of his ancestor Joseph long before, "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God." He lets the thought grow. He lusts for her. He sends for her. He sleeps with her. He gets her pregnant, and only when that message returns to him from Bathsheba do the alarms start going off in his brain. But once tender-conscienced David isn't saying, "Oh, what have I done!" He's thinking, "What am I going to do to cover up what I have done."

So the snowball has begun to roll down the mountain and is soon to cascade into an avalanche. Now comes the cover up. David brings Uriah home from war for a conveniently timed furlough. Surely, unsuspecting Uriah will reunite with his wife after a long time away and this will all go away. But Uriah can't bear the thought of enjoying his little vacation while his comrades in arms are out in battle camp, so he sleeps outside. David doubles down. He figures he'll grease the wheels and get him drunk. There's no way he'll refuse a night with his wife then, but again Uriah sleeps outside, to the great chagrin of David who isn't going to be able to pass this off as Uriah's child.

Now the one who was once guilt-stricken about cutting a corner of a garment, is plunging head long into adultery and treachery and first-degree intentional homicide, to be carried out by the sword of his enemy. David writes a dispatch letter with the scheme to have Uriah killed "accidentally" in battle. In the irony of ironies, he sends that death sentence letter with Uriah to carry back to camp, and Uriah is too loyal to open it and discover what a traitor his king is and what this furlough has all been about. Uriah carries the letter. He gets placed into the front line of battle and the men are instructed to draw back and hang him out to dry. Uriah is killed and when the news reaches David that his treacherous murderous plan has succeeded, his once tender-hearted conscience has now been so dulled by sin that he has the gall to respond with an [Oh well], "**Don't let this upset you; the sword devours one as well as another.**" (2 Samuel 11:25).

*Oh, David, how could you? How could you fall so far?* And the answer is simpler than you might think. Not some flaw in the nurture or the environment that he had grown up. Not some added stress or pressure that made it a little more understandable. No, he did what he did, because he wanted to and he could. He was the king. Sin seized the opportunity and produced in him every kind of covetousness, even for a man's wife, and he took her and killed her husband, and this is one of the most terrifying stories in the Bible because it shows us what sin living inside of us, left unchecked and unrepented of, is capable of. And if you don't think you can fall this far, remember this is the man after God's own heart carrying on for months in deliberate sin, unrepentance, and very likely total unbelief.

So before we carry on with anymore, "David, how could you's!" we had better first take a good long look into the mirror of God's law and consider how we fare, not just the version that others see, and not just the façade that we've convinced ourselves is true, but the true image of us that God sees in the light of his holy law. He is not impressed by people who have not committed the great sins David did because they weren't king and they lacked the opportunity or the power to do so, or the only reason they stopped back from doing what they wanted was the fear or embarrassment of getting caught. See if you pass the test when you look inside your own heart and mind where only you and God see. And make sure you have the true standards of the law in mind. "**Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**" (Matthew 5:28). And "**Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer.**" (1 John 3:15) "**Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect.**" (Matthew 5:48). We look at the mirror of God's law hoping to find the fairest of them all, and the mirror looks back at adulterers and murders and says, **1. "How could you?"**

That kind of mirror is what it finally took for David to see what he had become and to recognize what he had done, although he didn't know he was looking at himself. God sent the prophet Nathan to David to paint a picture of a monster, a rich man, who had taken a poor man's only lamb, a lamb that was almost like a daughter to him, and slaughtered that lamb and fed it to his guests rather than take one of the many sheep he had at his disposal. David, perhaps thinking he was hearing a case for him to judge as Israel's king, enthusiastically condemned that man as worthy of death and paying retribution 4 times over, only to find once again in the great irony of ironies, that he was the man, the man who deserved to die.

Before we moved on to what David says next, you must first realize here that this terrifying confrontation of God's prophet who was sent to rebuke his straying king, is not just a demonstration of God's wrath and law, but also of his relentless mercy. Praise be to the God who loved David and you enough to rebuke you and call you back from sin instead of letting you go your own forsaken way down to death and hell.

That call to repentance came through a difficult assignment given to the Lord's servant Nathan, and it was successful! David finally acknowledged his sin and realized his need for repentance. He confesses, **"I have sinned against the LORD."** (2 Samuel 12:13). Short and bleak and honest! Maybe we'd prefer him to confess a little more, break down and cry a little bit, really show how sorry he is, and make some promises. But that's not what the Lord records for us. Instead, immediately, the prophet Nathan replies, **"The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die."** (2 Samuel 12:13).

That brings us finally to the most important and difficult question of this whole story. The question that first came to our minds, was, "How could David," but the question that hardest and most important to answer is this question instead, **2. "How could God?"**

How could God let him off the hook so easily? How could God forgive him *just like that*? He had an affair. He killed her husband. He says, "I've sinned." And *just like that* his sins are taken away. It seems like such a sham to us because we live under the constant deception that mercy is something to be merited by how sorry we are and forgiveness is something to be earned by what amends we make, but dear friends, you must see that that's not mercy or forgiveness at all. That's all wages and works and merit thinking. God forgave David because he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love.

If we return to the part of the question we never answered before, "How could David ask for what he asks for in Psalm 51, for God to have mercy on him after all he did? It's because he was trusting the proclamation Nathan had already made to him. **"The Lord has taken away your sin."**

What David is demonstrating for us in Psalm 51, which he wrote some time in the aftermath of when Nathan came to see him, is the true nature of repentance. He recognizes his sin for what it really is—sin. God had pointed it out and now he had acknowledged and confessed it. That part is often called contrition, but repentance in the full sense doesn't stop with just being sorry. Judas was filled with sorrow right before he hung himself and went to hell. Repentance worked in us by the Holy Spirit makes a huge unmerited leap from being sorry to

trusting God's word to us that he has forgiven us. We don't deserve to be able to do it, but we do because God bids us to return to him. Godly repentance is trust in his forgiveness. The second part of repentance beyond just sorrow is faith in his mercy and compassion. David was simply continuing to ask for and meditate on the forgiveness that the Lord had already promised to give him through the prophet Nathan.

That's the leap of faith we see in David's words in Psalm 51:1,2, **"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.** David answered the question, "How could God ever forgive me?" the same way we must all answer it. God could and does forgive what we could never atone because of his great mercy, his unfailing love, his great compassion, and because of his enduring faithfulness to his promises.

The promise that God had made to David about his offspring would still prove true in the future. The first son that Bathsheba bore would die after a week. Don't think that David didn't face any consequences for his actions. But David himself would not die, because the Lord had promised that from David's own body would come a king who would reign over a kingdom forever—no, not just Solomon, Bathsheba's second son, but a son from his line, David's Greater Son. Matthew 1, the genealogy we like to skip over reading, shows us the lineage of Jesus, the Son born from the royal line of David and Bathsheba. He is the Son who would be punished for every sin. He is the lamb God would be offered in David's stead to make retribution not just for the great sins of one man, but for all the sins of the world—yours and mine too.

Today as we reflect on repentance, we see that it trusts God to forgive us the terrifying acts our sinful nature, because of his great mercy and love, and the payment made by his own dear Son. Dear sinners, one and all, you this day who have looked into the unyielding mirror of the law, the Lord's word to you is the same as it was to David, "Your sin has been taken away." "Repent and believe the good news." Amen.