

YOU HAVE DESPISED THE WORD OF THE LORD

SERIES: "YOU ARE THE MAN"

by Steve Zeisler

There's an old gospel song that I sometimes think of when I'm preparing to speak. The lyrics are appropriate for preachers, it seems to me. They read this way:

*"I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love;
I love to tell the story because I know 'tis true,
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do...*

*I love to tell the story, for some have never heard
The message of salvation from God's own holy Word." (1)*

It's a privilege to tell the story of Jesus and his glory and love. Often the stories are of Jesus' love for the downtrodden, the left-behind, the hurting--a leper, a centurion, a Samaritan, a woman who insisted that she would sit at his feet and hear him teach.

It's harder to tell the stories of Jesus' love for the hypocrites, the hardened, the arrogant, the violent, the stiff-necked, the complicated, the falsely religious (those who "have a form of godliness but deny its power"; 2 Timothy 3:5). It's harder to tell the story of Jesus' love for people whose lives have gotten so twisted that they don't know where to turn. How can we tell the story of their rescue?

DYING ON THE INSIDE

We're in a series of studies of the incident in Scripture when David took Bathsheba in adultery and killed her husband, and the aftermath of those choices. We've come now to 2 Samuel 12. King David was a man whom God had chosen, after his own heart. A man who had fought against and united the tribes of Israel, a man who had served God for decades. At this point in the story he had come to a terrible place in his life. He had gained the whole world but lost his soul. He had succeeded in using his royal power to make himself a god, choosing who should live and who should die. He was the spider at the center of the web, the knower of mysteries. He had made his companions either dupes or accomplices, and had killed one of them cold-heartedly.

In a sense, at this point David had become so estranged from God, his sin had so weakened him, that he couldn't turn around. David had given up hope of ever finding God again, of ever being anyone different from the man he was. He didn't know where to turn. He had lied too long and too successfully. In Twila Paris' song *The Lamb of God* (2) there is a line that always strikes me when I hear it: "I was so lost I should have died." That was David's condition now.

Psalms 107 talks about rebels in dungeons. Verses 10-12:

**"Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom,
prisoners suffering in iron chains,**

**for they had rebelled against the words of God
and despised the counsel of the Most High.**

**So he subjected them to bitter labor;
they stumbled, and there was no one to help."**

Spurning the counsel of the Most High God, they had forged strong chains for themselves. Remember, when we left off in the last message (Discovery Paper 4592), David had killed Uriah and married Uriah's widow early in her pregnancy with his own child. By the time we pick up the story in chapter 12, the baby had been born. Many months had gone by, during which time David had been living estranged from God, succeeding by all outward appearances but dying on the inside. He later wrote Psalm 32 about his life during this period. Verses 3-4:

**"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 sapped
as in the heat of summer."**

He was failing, choking. He couldn't sleep. He had nowhere to turn. He had lost the God who loved him. Outwardly he was still continuing on as king, but inwardly he was lost.

Where would a man like this turn? He was the king. No one was going to make changes for him. He had become more and more seared of conscience. He didn't know how to call on God for help.

RISKY CONFRONTATION

What is the story of Jesus and his love in a situation like this? Let's read of the prophet whom God sent after the king in the act of love that saved David. 2 Samuel 12:1-6:

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."

This is one of those scenes in the Bible that it is very helpful to visualize. Apparently David was presiding in some kind of judicial setting. We know that Moses acted as judge at various times when the Israelites were wandering in the desert. People would come and bring to him their troubles, problems, and tensions, and he would decide who was right and who was wrong.

Solomon also acted as a judge. Remember the famous story of the two women contending over a baby who came to Solomon for his judgment (1 Kings 3:16-28). It was required of the leader of the nation to periodically serve as a judge, and apparently David was acting in that capacity when Nathan strode into the room where the affairs of court were taking place and told this story. David assumed it was a real event, so he rendered a formal judgment that was proper according to the law. The man should repay fourfold for the lamb that he stole and killed to make a meal for the traveler.

But we also read of David's emotions: "This man should be killed for what he did, for his arrogant lack of compassion!" It was an abuse of power this rich man engaged in. He got away with selfishness precisely because he could. For a simple meal for a stranger, a moment's pleasure, he brought great harm to a family who could not defend themselves. David's own torment; the sleepless nights; the rage he felt at his own weakness, lack of compassion, and brokenness exploded out in anger at the story of the man who took the lamb.

The kind of thing David was doing here is my own experience, and I've seen it many times in the lives of other people. When I am really upset with some pattern of failure in me, especially one that I won't acknowledge to myself, I very often choose that as the thing to be angry at in someone else.

Some years ago I remember spending a long time with a man who was deeply angry about the notion that anyone who had ever been divorced could serve in Christian leadership. He would aggressively quote Bible verses. God hates divorce, so why would PBC allow people into leadership who have been divorced? We were on the slippery slope to oblivion, and on and on. But the longer I knew him, the more I realized that he had a very pain-filled marriage. So, part of him longed to be divorced. He had stopped working on his marriage. He refused to love his wife and had divorced her in his heart. His venom toward divorce in the body of Christ was not righteous anger.

It's important to notice Nathan's position in this situation. He was a prophet, and he was given a word from the Lord to deliver to the king. But he had no army, no retinue, nobody standing beside him. David had killed the last person who had

had the temerity to talk of his failures (recall that Uriah had challenged David with his self-indulgence). Nathan was going into this setting with the word of God as his only defense. Yet there was no sense of hesitation in Nathan. He would say some painful and penetrating things to David. Nathan had no idea whether he would live through this day or not, whether the king would respond to the Lord or not.

When David, furious at the man who stole and killed the lamb, issued his judicial statement, he thought the matter was over. But Nathan wasn't finished with him. Verses 7-14:

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."

NO PLACE FOR RATIONALIZATION

The speech of Nathan showed no effort to soften the blow or spare David's feelings. It was devastating, hard-hitting. It was a clear and thoughtful destruction of all victimhood arguments that David might have raised. There were no extenuating circumstances, no set of rationalizations that was going to be accepted. Nathan gave most of this speech before David was able to utter one word, and everything that might have occurred to David to say in his own defense was disallowed before he could say it. When the person we really are is displayed in our own sight before God and perhaps before others, we often retreat to explanations of extenuating circumstances and rationalizations.

Let's consider three kinds of rationalizations that occur to most of us and that probably occurred to David.

The first one is, "You need to understand that I'm from a deprived background. I had a hurtful upbringing. I was denied many things in my life. If I've done anything to hurt anyone, I'm sorry, but I really couldn't help what I did."

What Nathan, speaking for the Lord, said to David contradicted that, insisting instead, "You have been given everything, and you are a man who doesn't know a thing about thankfulness. I have given you protection, honor, standing, authority, wives, everything that might occur to you, and if there were anything else, I would have given you that as well. What claim of needs gone unmet in your life makes any sense? What deprivation have you suffered that hasn't been met by the supply of God?"

The second rationalization is, "I didn't mean to do this. I didn't understand. It was an inadvertent slip-up. I was ignorant of some of the fine points, and I wandered into an area where I shouldn't have been."

Twice Nathan said to David, "You despised," a very strong word. He despised the word of the Lord and in fact he despised the Lord himself. He trampled on four of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) in this affair. Everyone in Israel, if they knew anything, knew the Ten Commandments. The sixth commandment is unambiguous: "You shall not murder." The seventh: "You shall not commit adultery." The ninth: "You shall not give false testimony [lie]..." The tenth: "You shall not covet...." Nathan was saying, "You despised the word of the Lord. There was no ignorance. You did mean to do what you were doing. You decided to be God yourself and to affront the God of heaven."

The third rationalization is, "It's not my fault." Remember, David and Joab had cooked up the lie at the end of chapter 11 that said, "People die in wars. Maybe Uriah would have gotten killed anyway. Other people get killed. After all, the Ammonites were really the ones who killed him. We didn't kill him. It's not our fault."

Nathan would have none of it. He said, "You took his wife, and you killed him by the sword of the Ammonites. It is your fault." And David had nowhere to hide. The brave prophet of God had said all of the hard things that he had avoided for the many months that he had been distant from God.

Finally, Nathan spoke of consequences that were going to follow: "Violence will attend your family for the rest of your life. Someone near to you is going to take your wives, the way you secretly took the wife of your friend, and humiliate you in front of all Israel by having sex with them in broad daylight. These consequences are the predictable outcome of the sins you have set in motion."

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

Let me say a word about consequences. Some people think of the consequences from God as random punishments from an angry deity. "I did something that made God mad, and that's why I got hit by lightning," or, "That's why I contracted this disease." It's rare that God directs specific negative events at a person as consequences for sin. In Romans 1, when we read of the descent of a culture into wickedness, it says God "gave them over" and let rebels have what they wanted. We create consequences for ourselves. We set in motion terrible things that have their own life, that bring their own hurt.

That's exactly what Nathan was predicting here. Three of David's sons would end up dying untimely deaths. Two of those were acting just like their father. They learned of his lust, lies, and violence, and they acted similarly.

In John 9:2, the disciples came to Jesus at one point and said, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus' reply suggested that the question was wrong. This man's blindness was going to lead to the glory of God. We shouldn't think of God as throwing a lightning bolt of blindness into someone's life because their parents sinned or even because they sinned. Consequences are natural outcomes of the choices we make. Others learn from our rebellion and carry out their own.

We're studying this because of its analogy to current events. I was thinking that one possible outcome of the recent events in Washington is that Chelsea Clinton will marry someone like her father and will be treated for the rest of her life the way he has treated her mother. Girls often marry a man like their father. What if the president spends the rest of his life watching his daughter being mistreated in exactly the same way that her upbringing suggested, knowing that she is being hurt because his sins shaped her choices?

CONFESSION AND RESTORATION

As I mentioned, Nathan took his life in his hands when he went to the king. The last man who confronted the king had gotten killed. Now the key moment comes in verse 13. Perhaps David would say, "Who do you think you are, talking to the king in this way? There is no proof. There are no witnesses." Then turning to the guards, he might order, "Execute him!" David had that power. He could have resisted the effort of God to love him one more time. Remember, this is the story of Jesus and his love, of God seeking somebody who needed him. The prophet came with hard truth, saying, "I am God's spokesman telling you what you need to hear. God is penetrating your life with these words because he wants to do good to you. But you must agree."

Then we hear David's extraordinary, simple statement: "I have sinned against the LORD." There was no explanation, no promises to never do it again. He had no clear notion that God would even have him back. But he did know that he couldn't go on living the way he was living, that finally someone had broken the silence and given him a chance to say what his heart had been wishing to say.

Nathan's wonderful response to his confession was, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die." Now, God had to challenge the law to do that, because adultery and murder were both capital offenses. The law given from Sinai had no exceptions on these matters. Yet the spokesman of God declared, "You are going to live."

However, the next statement is also important: "But...the son born to you will die." David's son died as a consequence of his sin. But the child's death also foreshadowed the day to come when another innocent son of David, the Lamb of God himself, would die, not only because of David's sin, but in payment for the sin of the whole world.

Let me make a couple of observations in conclusion. First, the record suggests that David was never again a great king. He had been a remarkable ruler and a brilliant general, but he declined in stature from this time forward.

On the other hand, he grew and deepened as a man of God. Most of the psalms people have loved in every generation for three thousand years were written as David reflected on what he had learned throughout his life. David was restored as an intimate of God. He was once again the sweet singer of Israel. He could lead others in genuine worship and offer hope to the failed and broken.

History does not remember David as a failure. Neither Jews nor Christians, when they tell David's story, turn primarily to this account. It was not the center of David's life story. He was a man whose life is summarized more by his psalms than by his failures, a man who wrestled with God, a man who loved God. He is, by any standard, one of the greatest and most influential figures in human history. My son is named David in honor of King David.

The only thing Nathan had to persuade David with was God's word, and David assented. He could have refused. But the voice of one man saying God's words changed everything. Perhaps what happened when Nathan confronted David is happening to you right now. Perhaps God is saying that your complicated, dead-on-the-inside, looking-good-on-the-outside, chained-up soul is lost. Take the opportunity to respond, "I have sinned against the Lord." It's the simplest thing in the world to agree that what God says is true. And what we get in return is God's embrace.

"I love to tell the story of unseen things above,

*Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love;
I love to tell the story because I know 'tis true,
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.*

*I love to tell the story, for those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest;
And when in scenes of glory I sing the new, new song,
'Twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long." (3)*

NOTES

1. Katherine Hankey, *I Love to Tell the Story*, 1866.
2. Twila Paris, *The Lamb of God*, © 1985 Straightway Music/Gaither Copyright Management.
3. Hankey.

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Catalog No. 4593
2 Samuel 12:1-14
Fourth Message
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November 8, 1998

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