

Lesson 13: The Fall of David (2 Samuel 7-16)

The Davidic Covenant and the Temple

With the establishment of David as king, a new covenant is forged with Yahweh.¹ This new covenant establishes for the first time a kingdom, with its capital in Jerusalem where the Ark of the Covenant is moved. The conquest of the Philistines and their removal from Jerusalem is the end of the Exodus. Now that the Chosen People have a kingdom and a city of their own, David wishes to honor the Lord – to whom he and the people owe everything – with the building of a permanent Temple. The timing of David’s inspiration to build the Temple is not accidental. For generations the Israelites had been wandering without a stable home, but finally it seems they have the Promised Land for themselves and can make it a place to know (*yada*) and serve (*avad*) the Lord.

The work of the conquest is complete and now “the Lord had given them rest.”² Remember, in Egypt Pharaoh made them so busy that they could not worship the Lord,³ but now that the work of the wandering is over it is time to get back to worship. Moses himself prophesized that they would destroy the pagan worship and give true worship to Yahweh.⁴ This action, in a sense, parallels the work of creation when God rested on the seventh day. So too the Israelites, now that they have completed their work, begin to offer days of rest so that they might *avad* Yahweh. Work should always be directed to worship. Certainly, it has a dignity in itself, but it must be oriented toward the glorification of God with hearts that desire to *yada* the Lord. In this way, our work adopts a character of dignity that transcends the mere temporal and provisional.

David calls the prophet Nathan to him and says, “See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the Ark of God dwells in a tent.”⁵ Here, David recognizes that his own house is greater than the house (tent) of the Lord and implies that it is time for God to have a permanent and glorious home (although David will not actually build the temple...it will be left for his son, Solomon to build). David’s proclamation is a welcomed change. He is a leader who will seek the glory of the Lord before his own gain. The building of the Temple is a sign that the kingdom is not just a physical reality, but it has a real, if not preeminent, spiritual reality. In response to David, Nathan speaks to him on behalf of the Lord:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth...Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house...I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he

¹ 2 Samuel 5:3

² 2 Samuel 7:1

³ Exodus 1

⁴ Deuteronomy 12:1-12

⁵ 2 Samuel 7:2

shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him... And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.⁶

This is quite a prophecy for David, in that it is more than a promise about the future, but it is also an echoing back to the promise made to Abraham.⁷ David is now to be the father of a great nation through which the original promise to Abraham will be fulfilled. As a faithful man who knew the history of Israel, there is no doubt that David would have been in awe of his new role. David is not just to be the political leader of Israel, but the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and the foundation of an everlasting kingdom from which the Messiah will come through dynastic succession – pretty heady stuff for a shepherd boy. This is all in response to David’s pure heart and proclamation that he will build a temple for the Lord, and yet with the establishment of the dynastic succession God is in a sense saying, “I do not need a temple (“house of God”) as a sign of my presence but my presence will be in the Davidic dynasty (“house of David”).

The covenant established here with David expands the covenant into a holy and everlasting kingdom that will produce God’s own son, the Messiah, for the good of all nations. A heavenly temple is established so that all people may come to *yada* and *avad* the one true God.

And so we see again that Yahweh is not afraid to take the humble to bring about His divine plan. We also see that Yahweh is not to be outdone in generosity. David forgets himself for the time being and promises to build God a temple. Instead of simply accepting this act of just worship, God turns the tables and gives more to David than even David could have hoped. This should be a lesson for us today: when we give to God what is due Him, God is pleased with our *avad* and blesses us. The blessing may not necessarily be one of material gain, but it is always one of spiritual gain (which is everlasting). God’s plans for us are infinitely greater than any plans we have for God.

A brief note should be said about the title “Son of David.” It is from Nathan’s prophecy that the title becomes an explicit reference to the Messiah. As clearly noted elsewhere in the Scriptures, “Son of David” evokes a much broader meaning than simply genealogical descent.⁸ It is the title that becomes the most common reference to the Messiah; the Catholic liturgy for the Solemnity of Saint Joseph includes New Testament texts referring to Jesus as the “Son of David” because it is Joseph who is the guarantor of the Davidic descent of Jesus from the “house of David.”⁹

David’s Sin

Sadly, as we have consistently seen, even those chosen by God to mediate his promises are subject to the temptation of sin. Although David is anointed to serve God, David

⁶ 2 Samuel 7:8-16

⁷ Genesis 12:2

⁸ As a sample, 1 Kings 8:25; Ps 132:10-18; Jer 17:24-27; Ezek 34:23-24; Mt 1:1; 9:27; Rom 1:3)

⁹ Mt 1:20; Lk 1:27

does not perfect virtue and allows disordered desire to lead him into the grave sins of adultery and murder. It happens like this: while David is walking on the palace roof, he sees a very beautiful woman, Bathsheba, bathing. Allowing himself to be overcome by passion, David has her brought to him and has sex with her, which results in a pregnancy. The king, being very anxious to hide his evil, calls Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, in from the battlefield where he was serving his nation and king heroically. David does his best to send Uriah home in order that he might sleep with his wife Bathsheba and thus assume her child to be his own. Yet Uriah is a loyal soldier, devoted to both God and his fellow soldiers. He replies, "The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing."¹⁰ Uriah is determined to show his commitment to God, king and countrymen by denying himself the comforts of home. Unlike David, Uriah has acquired the virtuous control of his physical urges, and he will not sleep with his wife.

In desperation, David turns to unprovoked murder in order to keep his crime secret. He sends Uriah to the commander, Joab, with this written message, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die."¹¹ Joab follows the king's instructions, and Uriah is killed in battle.

This seems like an unthinkable crime, but upon reflection it might be said that things have not changed all that much. David did not set out to kill one of his faithful soldiers, but ends up committing this awful crime because he allowed a seemingly innocent temptation to take root in his soul. David succumbs to simple lust, which turns into adultery, which turns into murder. Sin builds on sin and grows in the process. Perhaps the modern example of abortion is similar. No one sets out to participate in the killing of the unborn, but through the entertainment of lust many people find themselves in situations that suggest desperate measures to hide the sin of sexual license. This is why it is so important to cut sin out at its beginning, so it does not grow into something worse.

Nathan's Parable

David probably thinks he has saved himself from his sin, but he forgets that the Lord sees everything. Even when we sin in private, God is a witness to our actions. God sends the prophet Nathan to David who tells the king a story about two men. The first, a poor man, had only one little lamb whom he loved very dearly, but the second was rich and had many flocks. One day, the rich man, instead of taking one of his own sheep, took instead the poor man's lamb, slaughtered it, and served it for dinner to a guest. David, unaware that the story is an allegory for his crime against Uriah, becomes angry and blurts out, "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." What a devastating self-incrimination! How easy it is to see the evil of someone else's sin, and be wholly oblivious to our own! Nathan retorts, "You are the man," showing David in an instant all the heinousness of his actions.¹²

¹⁰ 2 Samuel 11:11

¹¹ 2 Samuel 11:15

¹² 2 Samuel 12:1-9; CCC, #2538

The king recognizes his guilt and is immediately repentant, saying, “I have sinned against the Lord.”¹³ Rather than trying to defend himself, David shows humility and his penitence is accepted, for Nathan responds, “The Lord also has put away your sin.”¹⁴ Why does Yahweh forgive David’s sin while He condemns Saul? David repents while Saul was obstinate in his sin. David is also humble in his acceptance of Nathan’s condemnation. David could have easily silenced Nathan as he silenced Uriah, but instead he laments his sin with sincere remorse.¹⁵

Nonetheless, although David receives forgiveness, he must still suffer the consequences of his own actions. Nathan tells him “the sword shall never depart from your house...”¹⁶ As we shall see, David’s sin acts like a sword upon his own family, causing deep division in the royal household and eventually in the kingdom as a whole. Further, his condemnation of the rich man in the story becomes realized: he says that the man should pay for what he has done four-fold, and because of his wrongdoing four of his sons shall forfeit their lives, beginning with the child of his adulterous union with Bathsheba,¹⁷ then his son Amnon,¹⁸ then Absalom,¹⁹ and finally Adonijah.²⁰ He has been pardoned, yet the effects of his sin must now be borne patiently. [make explicit: the guilt, eternal punishment, is forgiven, but the consequences, temporal punishment remains. If this is born patiently it will act as reparation to repair the damage.]

Absalom’s Rebellion and Family Division

Nathan prophesized that David’s sin would bring division to his household, and it does not take long for this to come true. David’s son, Absalom, has a beautiful sister, Tamar, and another son of David’s (from another wife), Amnon, desires her very greatly. Like his father, Amnon is mastered by his lust and calls Tamar to his room where he forces himself on her. When Absalom hears of his sister’s defilement, he is enraged and full of hatred for Amnon. David, on the other hand, “was very angry” – and that’s all!²¹ There is no record of David taking any decisive action, of justly punishing Amnon for his atrocity.

It seems that David’s own personal shame has robbed him of the moral confidence and authority necessary to fulfill his duty as head of the household. His own guilt has made him politically and domestically powerless. This is an example of how personal sin can affect public action. History is riddled with politicians and other public figures that, because of their own personal failures, are incapable of providing needed leadership in their public office. As we see with David, personal virtue is needed for public officials.

¹³ 2 Samuel 12:13

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Psalm 51 is David’s lamentation about his own sin.

¹⁶ 2 Samuel 12:10

¹⁷ 2 Samuel 12:18

¹⁸ 2 Samuel 13:29

¹⁹ 2 Samuel 18:14-15

²⁰ 1 Kings 2:25

²¹ 2 Samuel 13:21

Because David does nothing, Absalom takes it upon himself to avenge the outrage done to his sister, and for two years Absalom plans and plots and waits for the circumstances in which to carry out his vengeance on Amnon. Finally, he manages to get Amnon out of the city and has him executed. Absalom, for fear of his own life, then goes into exile.²² Whether it is on account of the new estrangement between Absalom and David or perhaps due to the recognition of David's unwillingness to be a strong ruler of his family, Absalom eventually decides to rise up in revolt in quest for the throne for himself. Absalom begins to campaign and promises a better system, saying, "Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a suit or cause might come to me, and I could give him justice."²³ Apparently his efforts won him some popularity, for we read, "Absalom stole the hearts off the men of Israel".²⁴

Absalom secures as his ally Ahithophel, the grandfather of Bathsheba and formerly David's counselor. The irony is thick that it is Bathsheba's dad who is now working against David. In fact, it is Ahithophel who counsels Absalom to sleep with David's concubines on the roof of the palace as a mocking retribution for David's adultery with the woman of another man—a woman he first saw on a roof.²⁵

Upon hearing of Absalom's plans to take over the kingdom, David flees and goes into exile.²⁶ How things have changed from the days of David's courage before Goliath. His sins are finally bearing their full fruit, for sins always lead to fear, division and exile. Actually, this entire domestic-political fiasco would not have happened without the division that came first from his sinful lust. First of all, David's lust for Bathsheba resulted in his loss of moral strength and authority. Secondly, his lust for many women led to his taking many wives,²⁷ even though the Law clearly states that the king is not to multiply wives.²⁸ Remember, the Law says that the king must not marry more than once, he must not accumulate wealth, and he must not accumulate power, and on top of this the king is to meditate on the Law all his life.²⁹ By meditating on these laws David will remember that he is king for the good of the entire world, otherwise he will be like the other kings and govern for his own gain.

The sons of all the different wives are the ones in conflict, each with the other, because they already come from a wrongfully divided family. Finally, Amnon's lust for Tamar ignites the clash with Absalom. The simple truth is that God only instituted sexuality that it might be exercised between a husband with one wife, and any divergence from this format brings about painful division. We see this throughout the Old Testament: Abraham's relationship with Hagar leads to discord between her children and Sarah's children; Jacob's marriage to both Rachel and Leah results in jealousy between the two wives and between their sons; and now David's disordered desires cause his sons of

²² 2 Samuel 13:1-39

²³ 2 Samuel 15:4

²⁴ 2 Samuel 15:6

²⁵ 2 Samuel 16:21-22

²⁶ 2 Samuel 15:14

²⁷ 1 Chronicles 14:3

²⁸ Deuteronomy 17:17

²⁹ Deuteronomy 17:14-17, 19

different wives to kill each another (Absalom kills Amnon, and Solomon will kill Adonijah). Nor is evidence lacking in our own time of the dangers of uncontrolled passion. Sexual sins are destroying families before our very eyes. Homosexual unions, the current divorce rate, abortion, and the number of children born out of wedlock all indicate the powerful harm done to society through a refusal to control our sexual urges. There is a real and present danger to the traditional family, which can only lead to broader divisions within society.

Absalom's domination is short-lived. Hushai, a spy for David, undermines the counsel of the treacherous Ahithophel and saves David's life by informing him of the plans for a coup d'etat.³⁰ Absalom's final downfall comes when his head gets caught in a tree while he is riding a mule. Joab, defying the king's express instruction to preserve his son, finds Absalom in the tree and stabs him in the heart three times. Upon hearing the news David is far from gratified. Instead we read that he "went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"³¹

Throughout the trials brought on by his sin, David never becomes bitter or reproachful of God or neighbor. Never does he try to evade responsibility for his guilt, but instead he becomes penitent before the Lord and bears his great suffering patiently. The outcome is that in spite of his crimes and punishments, God blesses David abundantly and continues to show him favor. After all, David remains at the head of the kingdom of Israel, and he establishes the Davidic line, of which Christ Himself will be a descendant even though David himself was a great sinner.

This is what makes David so noble. His nobility rests not in that he is perfect, but that he gets up after he falls, accepts the consequences humbly, and continues on in the service of Yahweh. He is a profound model of hope. Such is an inspiration to all of us, for if we contritely receive the difficulties that come from our own sins, then those struggles become salvific, and the sin can be redeemed. David is a model sinner (choosing for himself without respect to God or neighbor), but he is also a model of repentance. If we take responsibility for our personal sin then it can be a saving grace. We must, however, acknowledge our sinfulness, confess our sins, and then proceed with a gratitude for God's mercy and a trust that Our Loving Father can turn anything to good, even our mistakes. There is sometimes the tendency to punish ourselves for our sin rather than bearing the consequences patiently. This should be a real message of hope and reason not to despair. God can bring a great good out of our sin if we bear it honestly and patiently. Saint Gregory the Great said it well, "We broke our union with God through sin; therefore, it is right that we should make our peace with him through the obstacles we meet. In this way, whenever a created thing, good as it may be in itself, becomes a cause of suffering for us, it serves as a form of correction so that we might return humbly to the author of all

³⁰ 2 Samuel 17:5-23

³¹ 2 Samuel 18:33

peace.”³² Then, like David, we will be able to say, “The Lord lives, who has redeemed my soul out of every adversity.”³³

David Prefigures Christ

A brief word should also be said as to how David prefigures Christ. Clearly, as king David is a type of the Messiah, and Jesus comes from the very line of David. David is also described as being “after God’s own heart,” which, other than Jesus himself, is the only person the Bible describes so. David’s qualities, even his name (“Son of David”), are attributed to Jesus. Incidents in the life of David are often regarded by the Church Fathers as foreshadowing the life of Christ: Bethlehem is the birthplace of both; the shepherd life of David points out Christ, the Good Shepherd; the five stones chosen to slay Goliath are typical of the five wounds; the betrayal by his trusted counselor, Achitophel, and the passage over the Cedron remind us of Jesus’ passion.

There are many other examples of how David is a “type” of Jesus. Through the circumstances of his exile from Jerusalem, David is forged in the likeness of Christ. For instance, David crosses the brook Kidron just as Jesus does.³⁴ David goes to the Mount of Olives and weeps; Jesus goes to the same place and sweats blood.³⁵ Ahithophel, David’s counselor, betrays David; Judas, Jesus’ apostle, betrays Jesus.³⁶ Ahithophel hangs himself just as Judas does.³⁷ And David humbly accepts the suffering God has for him just as Jesus does.³⁸ The similarities are not mere coincidence. God, in His ineffable wisdom, use circumstances and events to tie various figures of the Bible together, and this is no more apparent than with David and Jesus.

Psalms

While not part of the narrative of the Old Testament story, a word needs to be said about the Book of Psalms (literally, “the book of praises”) since most of the Psalms are attributed to David.³⁹ The Psalms are a collection of 150 songs and prayers offered to the Lord for a variety of occasions, and they are at the heart of the prayer of the Church. Besides their frequent use at Mass, the official, daily prayer of the Church (The Liturgy of the Hours) is deeply rooted in praying the Psalms. From the Psalms come beautiful songs of praise, prayerful meditations, mournful lamentations, and even prophecy. Among the most famous of the Psalms is Psalm 51, where David reflects on his sin with Bathsheba and offers a profound prayer of repentance. There is nothing in all of Christendom that matches its moving recognition of ones own failings and dependence on God. There are few better meditations for prayer than the Psalms.

As we have seen, the value of David in salvation history, and in the life of the faith today is diverse and profound. The Catechism offers a strong assessment of David’s role in

³² Saint Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, 3, 15-16

³³ 1 Kings 1:29

³⁴ 2 Samuel 15:23 and John 18:1

³⁵ 2 Samuel 15:30 and Mark 14:26

³⁶ 2 Samuel 15:31 and Matthew 26:47-50

³⁷ 2 Samuel 17:23 and Matthew 27:5

³⁸ 2 Samuel 16:5-14 and Matthew 26:39

³⁹ 2 Samuel 23:1

salvation history: “David is par excellence the king ‘after God’s own heart,’ the shepherd who prays for his people and prays in their name. His submission to the will of God, his praise, and his repentance, will be a model for the prayer of the people. His prayer, the prayer of God’s Anointed, is a faithful adherence to the divine promise and expresses a loving and joyful trust in God, the only King and Lord. In the Psalms David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the first prophet of Jewish and Christian prayer. The prayer of Christ, the true Messiah and Son of David, will reveal and fulfill the meaning of this prayer.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ CCC, #2579