

# Thursday

## PSALM 51: THE BACK STORY AND WHY IT MATTERS NOW

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In today's reflection we will consider the implications of Psalm 51 for our current times. The back story of this compelling psalm is just as important for us today as it was at the time of its writing.

### PSALM 51

*To the chief musician. A psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.*

1. *Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.*
2. *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.*
3. *For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.*
4. *Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgement.*

[\(You can read the whole psalm – I just included 4 verses here\).](#)

### PSALM 51: THE HORRIFIC BACK STORY

Right at the outset, we are provided with descriptive information about Psalm 51. Addressed to the *Chief Musician*, this psalm is not just for personal penitence, but for public prayer.

This beautiful psalm is a song of remorse and repentance, a prayer for forgiveness, and a plea from a contrite heart. But what's the back story or the background context? Why was David so repentant, what did he do that warranted such remorse and a plea for forgiveness?

Strap on your seat belts for a story that is filled with lust, murder, suspense and intrigue. This story can be found in 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12.

The story begins when King David's army is on the battlefield, but he is safe at his palace having some rest and relaxation. One evening he enjoys a walk on the palace rooftop and from this vantage point he sees a beautiful woman bathing. He then enquires about her and learns that she is the wife of one of his soldiers Uriah who was currently on the battlefield. He calls her to the palace and sleeps with her. After some time, she discovers that she is pregnant, and she sends David this news.

King David then embarks on a series of cover-ups. He summons Uriah from the battlefield under the pretence that he needs word on the army's progress. Uriah provides feedback to the King, following which, David sends him home and sends a gift of food to the house.

The next morning David discovered that Uriah never went home, instead he slept at the door of the King's house with the Kings servants. David enquired of Uriah why he did not go to his wife after his journey. Uriah explained that his conscience couldn't let him go home to enjoy food and drink and the warmth of his wife, since his fellow soldiers were encamped in the open fields. Thus, David's Plan A failed.

The next night Plan B was implemented. David invites Uriah to the palace and this time he is wined and dined. He is plied with plenty of food and wine to sufficiently intoxicate him so that this time, he will go home and sleep with his wife. Plan B, like Plan A fails, since Uriah yet again sleeps where the King's servants slept.

David then implements his next cover-up plan, but this plan is exceedingly malevolent and cruel. This time he sends Uriah with a special letter to give to Joab, the army captain, this letter instructs Joab to position Uriah at the frontline of the battle where the battle is most fierce and leave him to be killed by the enemy. Uriah unknowing carried his own death sentence to the battlefield. The plan was executed, and David was sent word that some of his soldiers were killed, including Uriah. David responds in a dispassionate manner.

After her period of mourning for Uriah, King David then brought Bathsheba to the palace and made her one of his wives. While David was able to cover-up the pregnancy of Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, God was not blinded by the cover-ups. In 2 Samuel 11:27, God found David's action to be evil in his eyes.

Then God sends the prophet Nathan to David (2 Samuel 12). Nathan told David a story of a rich man and a poor man who lived in the city. The rich man had great wealth and the poor man had nothing except a lamb which he had purchased and lovingly raised. The lamb was so dear to the poor man, that he treated it as his child. The lamb even drank from the poor man's own cup. One day the rich man had a guest. Despite having his own flocks and herds, he took the poor man's beloved lamb, killed it and fed it to his guest.

David was furious on hearing about this rich man. He was determined that the rich man must die for this cruelty. It was then, that Nathan said, "**You are that man!**" Only then did David's conscience arise from its deadly slumber. Only then did David make the realization that his sin against Uriah and Bathsheba was a horrible sin against God. God had anointed him, given him power, authority and wealth, yet this was not enough. In giving in to his desires, he devastated the life and household of a poor man, a man who was a loyal servant to him.

#### **WHAT CAN WE GATHER FROM THIS BACK STORY?**

We now know why David was so repentant and what was the back story of his prayer of penitence in Psalm 51, but what can we gather from this story?

David was the King, well endowed with power, authority and all the material resources. He was anointed as the King to demonstrate the just rule of God which was entirely opposed to the type of rule exercised by Kings of nations who did not know the God of Israel. He was set apart to serve the people in wisdom and justice, he was endowed with all the power and authority to make wise decisions for the wellbeing of his people. King David was supposed to be the defender of the people. His subjects should have benefited from his care, wisdom, generosity and covering, yet, in the story

of David and Bathsheba we see a painful lapse in judgment, followed by dense deception and evil actions.

Power corrupts David. As he steps away from being a worshiper, and the servant of the Most High God, he steps into the realm of his illicit desires. David thinks he has rights on all things and all people. He feels entitled by his positional power to: see, take, cover-up using the machinery of the kingdom/state, even to murder. He invests his energy in cover-ups instead of making just decisions and turning away from further wrong.

David is quickly able to identify the evil of the rich man's actions in Nathan's prophetic story but only makes the link with *his own* evil action after Nathan identifies him as *that man*. On a positive note, Psalm 51 reminds us that repentance is possible, even after colossal failure.

This story can be simplistically summarised as the story about the consequences of adultery, the lust of a powerful and rich man and the depths of his cruelty to a loyal servant. There are also a range of gender implications. For the purpose of this message, I am interested in what God's prophet Nathan helps us to see. Nathan brings to our attention that David's sin is not just a moral failure, but a justice failure. Nathan's story deploys the use of **a rich man** and **a poor man** as his main characters. The economic condition of the rich man and the poor man is described. The rich man while possessing plenty, still takes of the inadequate and cherished possession of the poor man. The rich man (David), in the depth of his selfishness, brings death to the poor man (Uriah). It is not the possessions of the rich man that is the problem, but the condition of his heart.

#### **HOW DOES THE BACK STORY OF PSALM 51 CONNECT WITH THE BACK STORY OF YOUR SHELTER?**

There is a back story regarding why your shelter exists. This back story precedes the Covid lockdown. The back story of homelessness deals with selfishness, pathological greed, abuse of the poor, extreme lack of access to land, housing, health, education and the economy. The back story also deals with the unrepentance of the self-seeking affluent and powerful.

There are many who, like King David did with Uriah, abuse their power and authority. They are granted positions of great responsibility, yet they make evil decisions that devour and plunder those that are under their care, especially the poor. Unaccountable and unrepentant leaders are destructive, the poor suffer in their midst. The poor serve ungrateful kings/masters who, after taking their toil and destroying their families, also take their lives. Our world needs the prophets of God who will be able to speak to power and illuminate the sins of the powerful against God and the people whom God loves - these include the people in your shelter.

David lost his way and chose the path of destruction. This path brought calamity to Uriah but also to David's household as we see in 2 Samuel chapter 12, and later in 13. David did eventually realise the depths of his sin and the need for cleansing, as we see in Psalm 51. Tragically, some are still unrepentant, self-serving and self-deceived. They too, spend a great deal of time in cover-ups.

Nathan's contrast of the rich man and poor man is fitting in our time. The inequalities in our world are perpetuated by self-serving rich and powerful who decimate the lives of the poor. In the same way Uriah served David, the poor painstakingly serve the rich. The rich and powerful take the best years of the lives of the poor, including their health and wellbeing and their family time. The self-centred affluent take the precious lambs of the poor. The children of the poor grow up fatherless, as fathers go into the bowels of the earth to dig up the diamonds and gold for the crowns of the rich.

The children are sold to pay the debt of the parents who find themselves in chronic poverty. The poor are condemned to backbreaking labour. The women are trafficked into the flesh trade.

The rich man puts the poor man at the front line of the battle. When there is an economic downturn the shareholders of companies must be appeased, so the poor are sacrificed in their numbers through retrenchments. The poor are swiftly targeted, criminalised and trampled underfoot. Many are pushed out of the economy, and as such, cannot afford to pay for shelter. Some victims of rape and abuse flee their homes and end up on the streets. Some were denied proper health care and are driven out of their homes due to psychosocial issues. In serving their masters in the city, the poor live a distance from their places of work, much of their income is spent on travel to work and back. Some stay on the city streets just so that they can have some money to send to their families. Others flee their countries and end up on the streets of inhospitable cities around the world due to greedy, unjust and tyrannical leaders.

As nations contend with the ravages of Covid -19, yet again, it is the poor that experience the greatest impact. The poor and marginalised in many nations are disproportionately infected. In our nation, the poor are disproportionately affected. The poor suffer hunger, loss of income and loss of livelihood and a chronic lack of access. I suspect that as business makes critical decisions about their post lockdown future, the poor will be at greater risk. While the rich remain in relative comfort, the poor will be sent to the front line of the battle to battle poverty, unemployment, hunger and death. The poor are disproportionately affected by colonization, globalization, climate change and environmental degradation, during this global pandemic, yet again, the burden of the crisis will be disproportionately billed to the poor.

#### **NOTE TO SITE MANAGERS**

As site managers you are in diametric opposition to the unjust global order. You stand as the conscience and consciousness of the city to ensure that the poor are protected and treated in a manner of justice. You herald a New Tshwane/New Jerusalem where God's reign is a reign of justice for the poor, the abandoned, the homeless and the overlooked.

You will engage with media, business, government and civil society. You are the Nathans of our time who will dare to point out the complicity and responsibility of the powerful and selfish in the plight of the poor. You are called to illuminate the sins against the poor and arouse the conscience of the powerful. You stand in between the poor and pathological unrepentance, greed and corruption. You call for repentance and cleansing for the sins of injustice.

As God sent Nathan into David's presence and gave him the courage to address the powerful King may God grant you the wisdom to address the masters of the world. May the appointed day of repentance come near. As a nation may we pray Psalm 51.

#### **PRAYER**

God of Justice your eyes see the injustice to the poor. May the day of repentance draw near for the injustice against the poor.

Psalm 51:10 -19 - Create in us a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within us. Do not cast us away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from us. Restore to us the joy of your salvation and sustain in us a willing spirit.