

By a show of hands, how many of you have had the opportunity to visit the Pyramids in Egypt or the Great Wall of China? The Pyramids, the Great Wall of China—in one regard, both are feats of engineering genius, architectural wonders of the ancient world, but at the same time, they are monuments to the abuse of power.

In 2006, I had the opportunity to travel to Egypt to visit with some Alliance International Workers. We swam in the Red Sea, explored Cairo's Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, and shopped in the Old Cairo Souk. But no trip to Cairo is complete without seeing the Sphinx and the mighty Pyramids of Giza.

The first, and largest, pyramid at Giza was built by the pharaoh Khufu (his reign began in 2551 B.C.). His pyramid, which today stands 455 feet (138 meters) tall, is simply known as the "Great Pyramid."

It was impossible not to be impressed by what I saw; the stones are enormous and perfectly placed. How did they do what they did without the help of modern technology? That I cannot answer, but they did had something then that we don't now—slaves—hundreds of thousands of slaves. There was no ancient Egyptian Union to regulate hours worked, or to ensure a safe job site for employees. The cost of the materials was expensive, but forced labour was cheap—life itself was cheap. If a stone went awry and 7 workers were crushed, 7 more were pressed into place.

It is estimated that up to 1 million people were involved in building the Great Wall of China. The work force was primarily comprised of

three groups—soldiers, common people, and criminals; the last two groups were forced labour. It's impossible to estimate how many people died during the construction process.

Feats of engineering genius, architectural wonders to be sure, and at the same time, monuments to the abuse of power. Simultaneously, something that should cause us to marvel and shudder.

History is full of paradoxes, so too, our own lives. In his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning writes, "When I get honest, I admit that I am a bundle of paradoxes. I believe and I doubt, I hope and get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I am trusting and suspicious. I am honest and I still play games. Aristotle said that I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer."¹

At times, whether we look within, or, at the lives of others, we see the gap between what we believe/value and how we behave; we are walking contradictions. In fact, Christian theology contains a number of paradoxes that seem to be contradictory. Take for example one of Martin Luther's most famous pronouncements: *Simul Justus et Peccator*.

It means, "*Simultaneously Saint and Sinner*". As Christians, the righteousness of Jesus has been applied to our lives; we are declared "*not guilty*" on the basis of His sacrifice on the cross. And so, in one sense, we are saints; in another sense, we are still subject to sin and death. We are a "**both/and people**," both saint and sinner; we are

¹ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

both exposed by God’s holiness and covered by God’s grace.²

As we continue in our series through 1&2 Samuel, reflecting on David—one who was described as a man after God’s heart—we come to an event in his life that is filled with contradiction. In 2 Samuel 11-12, we find that though David may have a heart for God, he also has great capacity for evil. But what we discover is that no matter how great David’s sin, God’s grace is greater still.

If you have a Bible with you, paper or electronic, let me invite you to turn with me to 2 Samuel 11-12; that’s page 247 in the Blue Bible in front of you.

2 Samuel 11:1-5, *“In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.*

2 One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, 3 and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, “She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” 4 Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness.) [Why does the narrator include this observation? It’s a sure sign that she had not been pregnant before David slept with her.] Then she went back home. 5 The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, “I am pregnant.”

² Levi MacAllister, <https://levithepoet.net/blog/simul>.

Whenever David is talked about, he is unforgettably linked with two other people—the first is Goliath, the second is Bathsheba. We tend to talk about the first encounter in terms of victory, and the second in terms of moral failure.

These two encounters take place at very different points in David’s life. On the battlefield with Goliath, David was a young man—wide-eyed and innocent, untested, and without power. But when David saw Bathsheba he was no longer wide-eyed or innocent; he was older, experienced, and seated on the throne—the most powerful man in Israel. In both the ancient world and today, we all need to answer the following question: *What is power for? To protect and serve? Or, to demand, oppress, and seek one’s own advantage?*

When news of Bathsheba’s pregnancy reached him, David concocted a plan to recall her husband Uriah—a soldier—home from the front lines of battle, under the pretence of bringing a report on the war. Once home, Uriah would sleep with his wife Bathsheba, and naturally claim the pregnancy as his own doing.

But David didn’t count on Uriah’s integrity. In essence, Uriah said to David, *“All of my mates are on the front lines; it’s not right for me to be here to enjoy the comforts of home—a good meal, and making love to my wife—while they are risking their lives for their country.”*

Uriah’s protest cut like a knife. David shouldn’t have been at home either, vs. 1, *“In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war... David remained in Jerusalem.”* David wasn’t where he was supposed to be and he ended up doing what he should have never done.

Uriah refused to go home, even after David got him drunk. One author writes, “Uriah drunk is more pious than David sober.”³ With the failed cover-up-attempt, and unwilling to admit to his adulterous act, David sent Uriah back to the battle lines with a private letter for General Joab: “*Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die.* (vs. 15)”

The plan worked to perfection; Uriah and a number of others were killed, and David could breathe a little easier. Vs. 26, “*When Uriah’s wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. 27 After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the Lord.*”

As I was studying this week, Eugene Peterson helped me to see that there is one particular word in this account that is used repeatedly. David **sent** Joab out to battle; when he saw beautiful Bathsheba, he **sent** someone to enquire; he then **sent** messengers to get her; when he found out she was pregnant, he **sent** for Uriah; when Uriah didn’t cooperate, he **sent** him back to the front lines with a death wish; and when he received word of Uriah’s death, he **sent** for Bathsheba and made her his wife.⁴

In the context of this account, the word “**sent**” implies the power to command. David was the King, he got what he wanted, he took what he wanted.

³ Peter R. Ackroyd, *The Second Book of Samuel: Commentary*, 102; as quoted by Paul S. Evans, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: 1-2 Samuel*, 392.

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall*, 183.

⁵ Charles W. Colson, “The Power Illusion,” in *Power Religion*, 26.

Power isn’t inherently good or bad, how it is used is the deciding factor. Charles Colson, former Special Counsel to President Nixon, once wrote: “Power is like saltwater; the more you drink the thirstier you get...It’s difficult to stand on a pedestal and wash the feet of [others].”⁵

Once again, we see a pattern that had formed in David. David married Michal, but after he became a fugitive he married two more women; when he became King, he added four more wives. And 2 Samuel 5:13 says that after capturing Jerusalem, David took even more concubines and wives. In the ancient world, wives produced heirs, while concubines existed purely for sexual pleasure. Here’s the question: *how many wives and heirs did David need? How many sexual partners did he need?*

David regularly abused power in relating to women—Abigail, Michal, and Bathsheba are but a few. Bathsheba’s virtue was taken, her marriage violated, and her husband killed, to satisfy the King’s lust, and to protect his reputation.

We are most tempted to abuse power when we feel inadequate, when we fear losing something important, or, when we lack accountability. David’s complete lack of accountability made him dangerous to Bathsheba, to himself, and to the kingdom of Israel.

The question remains: *What is power for? To protect and serve? Or to get what we want and remove those who stand in our way?* Next Sunday I'm going to talk more about the abuse of power, in particular, the sexual assault that later took place within David's family, but for now I want to say that while David covered up his deeds, God took notice. Vs. 27 concludes, "*But the thing David had done displeased the Lord.*"

Chapter 12 begins with the following words, "*The Lord sent Nathan [the prophet] to David.*" Once again, the word "**sent**" implies the power to command. David was King, and for a time he had the power to take what he wanted, but even the King is subject to God. When God sent Nathan to confront David, the confrontation started innocently enough, Nathan brought the following report to David:

"There were two men in a certain town, one was 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...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 this man and said to Nathan, 'As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay

for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.' Then Nathan said to David, "**You are the man!**"

It was a brilliant, God-given strategy; Nathan told a story and David indicted himself. Before becoming King, in his younger years, David had been a shepherd of sheep—he knew how animals can work their way into one's heart. Nathan's story resonated with David—he felt the injustice of it—and he was outraged. Clearly, David identified with the poor man and stood in judgement over the rich one.

When Nathan uttered the words, "*You are the man,*" the trap was sprung. David was the cruel, rich man. David abused power. David destroyed a woman and a marriage. David sent an innocent man to his death.

It's relatively easy to point the finger at others; it's much harder to look in the mirror. But when Jesus begins to deal with us, He wants to talk **to us, about us**. Peterson writes, "This is the gospel focus: *you* are the [one]...The gospel is never about somebody else; it's always about you, about me....about who you are and what you've done, about who I am and what I've done."⁶

In many ancient cultures, a king was thought of as being divine, and so, the king wasn't subject to the prophet, the prophet was subject to the King. Prophets walked a razor's edge between speaking the truth and telling the king what he wanted to hear—but not Nathan. God *sent* Nathan—Nathan was subject to God, not David. *You are the man!*

⁶ Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall*, 184.

David had gone to such great lengths to cover up his infidelity, I'm surprised that David didn't get someone to take Nathan out. Instead, immediately, David responds, "*I have sinned against the Lord.*" No hiding, pretending, or performing, just confessing—*I have sinned.*

Only when we recognize and confess our sin, can we then respond to the salvation God offers. Peterson writes, "In the Christian life our primary task isn't to *avoid* sin, which is impossible anyway, but to *recognize* sin." The way of life for a Christian is not the way of perfection; at the heart of Christianity is the mercy, grace, and forgiveness of God—never forget this!

David is described as a man after God's own heart but at times we struggle to reconcile this description with what David did—adultery, manipulation, and murder. Was David any better than his predecessor, King Saul?

Here's the difference...when confronted with his sin, Saul denied and deflected, he blamed his circumstances or the people around him; when David was confronted he confessed, repented, and returned to the Lord.

Psalm 51 is one of David's more well-known Psalms; it was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and prompted by the events surrounding Bathsheba and Uriah. David writes,

"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...Cleanse me with

hyssop and I will be clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow... Create in me a pure heart, O God [only You can do such a thing], and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation".

Vs. 16, "*You do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it [in other words, I can't undo what I've done God; I can't make it right]... My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, God, You will receive.*"

2 Samuel 11-12 tells a horribly dark story; the only light to be found in it is God's response to David's confession. Nathan said, "*The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because you have shown utter contempt for the Lord, the son born to you will die.*"⁷

If you have ever been hurt, victimized, or subject to abuse, you might want God to be a little harder on David. The Lord has taken away his sin? This forgiveness seems too easy, too cheap; *make him work for it God—don't let him get away with it.* We long for people to be called to account—for justice to be done.

David is called to account, in this case, the consequence is life for life. David took a man's life and a life will be taken from him; David's life was spared but his child's life was taken. We're not told of David bargaining with God—*take my life instead*—but as a father myself, I have to believe that David bargained—*hard*—but to no avail. Sinful thoughts, desires, and actions always brings destruction

⁷ 2 Samuel 12:13-14.

upon us or others. David's actions forever altered Bathsheba and her family.

Tim Keller writes, "Most religious systems teach an afterlife, but ordinarily it is conditioned on you living a morally good and religiously observant life. Christianity...on the contrary offers salvation as a gift. It does not belong to the good people but to the people who will admit they are not good enough and need a saviour."⁸

For the proud person, the way of Jesus is like a wrecking ball—it exposes and shatters the pretensions of our own attempts at self-perfection. Christianity maturity does not mean coming to the place where we no longer have to say "sorry;" Christian maturity involves the growing humility of confession and repentance.

In Ephesians 2 we read, "**4** *But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, 5 that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!)*...**8** *God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. 9 Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.*

The forgiveness God offer may seem too "cheap," but the grace we receive in Christ is costly. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "grace is

⁸ Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, 174.

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost Of Discipleship*, 45.

¹⁰ Klyne Snodgrass, *NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 105.

costly because it calls us to follow...Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs [us our lives], and it is grace because it gives [us] the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son...and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us."⁹

We receive forgiveness because God loves us. And God's love for us isn't sentimental, it's costly and action-oriented. In the Incarnation, something epic happened—divinity and humanity was united in the person of Jesus. Jesus became the archetypal human being, our champion if you like, the One to whom all humanity was bound.

And so, while it is true to say that Jesus died on the cross and was raised to life for our sake, it is more accurate to say that we both died, and were raised with, Jesus. We live because we are united to the One who lives forever; we are raised because we are united to the One who was raised from death to life. One author writes, "Faith has an *adhesive* quality to it; it binds the believer to the One who is believed."¹⁰

This morning I want to invite you to respond to God's offer of grace. For those of you who have already staked your life upon Jesus, receive today a fresh measure of His grace. Though your sins are as

scarlet, He has washed you as white as snow. He is for you, not against you; nothing can separate you from His love. His forgiveness is yours because of Christ.

For those of you who have not yet responded to God's offer of life, make today the day. Though we are dead in our sins, separate from God and unable to work our way towards Him, through Christ, we can be made alive.

When Jesus died on the cross, He carried your pain, your disappointments, and your sin. He died and was raised to life so that you might be raised with Him. He stands even now, with open arms, inviting you to receive His forgiveness—there is nothing that He will not forgive. The only barrier that can keep you from God is your refusal to turn to Him.

When you admit that you need God's rescue, and that Jesus died in your place, something happens immediately. You are raised from death to life. You are adopted into God's family. You are filled with His powerful presence. And your feet are set on a new path. *Will you turn to Him today?*

Worship—*Create In Me*

Prayer

Benediction