

NATHAN CONDEMNS DAVID

DEVOTIONAL READING: 2 Samuel 12:1-9, 13-15

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 12

2 SAMUEL 12:1-9, 13-15

¹ 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. ² The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, ³ 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.

⁴ “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.”

⁵ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! ⁶ He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

⁷ 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. ⁸ I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. ⁹ 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.”

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But because by doing this you have shown utter contempt for the LORD, the son born to you will die.”

¹⁵ After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the child that Uriah’s wife had borne to David, and he became ill.

KEY TEXT

JUSTICE, LAW, HISTORY

Unit 3: Justice and Adversity

LESSONS 10–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List the positions held by David, Nathan, Uriah, and Bathsheba.
2. Compare and contrast the reaction of David with that of Saul when confronted with personal sin.
3. Commit to reading [Psalm 51](#) daily in the week and make it a personal prayer of confession, repentance, and restoration.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. **Confrontations**
- B. **Lesson Context**
- I. **Tale of Two Men (2 Samuel 12:1–6)**
 - A. **Contrasting Fortunes (vv. 1–3)**
 - B. **Blatant Injustice (v. 4)**
 - C. **Angry Verdict (vv. 5–6)**
- II. **Tale of the King (2 Samuel 12:7–9)**
 - A. **The Guilty One (v. 7a)**
Am I Guilty?
 - B. **The Blessed One (vv. 7b–8)**
 - C. **The Ungrateful One (v. 9)**
- III. **Moving Beyond the Tales**
 - A. **Confession (v. 13a)**
 - B. **Mercy (v. 13b)**
Remorse
 - C. **Consequences (vv. 14–15)**

Conclusion

- A. Accountability
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Eliam Ih-*lye*-am.

Joab Jo-ab.

Uriah Yu-*rye*-uh.

Introduction

A. Confrontations

Confrontations are hard for me. In my years as a professor, I have unfortunately had to confront many students for cheating. I get varied reactions: from outright denial, to hedging and excuse making, to full and immediate confession. Though I hope for an admission of guilt at some point, I never know how things are going to go. But things are easier and the consequences are lighter when a confession comes forth.

Scripture tells us about many such confrontations. It is clear that God holds humans accountable (examples: [Genesis 3:9–19](#); [4:6–15](#) [see [lesson 5](#)]; [1 Kings 18](#); [Jeremiah 21](#)). Sin must be confronted, especially when committed by those in powerful positions. What happens *after* confrontation reveals the character of the accused—and of God.

B. Lesson Context

At the time of today's lesson, the Israelite army was fighting the Ammonites ([Genesis 19:38](#); [Deuteronomy 2:19](#)). The date was about 990 BC. The particular backdrop for us is a siege of the Ammonite capital, Rabbah. This was located at the site of the modern city of Amman, Jordan. Situated at the sources of the Jabbok River, the city was about 40 miles east of Jerusalem.

With a good general directing his army, a king could stay home to take care of administrative concerns or personal matters. King David had such a man in Joab ([2 Samuel 8:16](#)). Although not without ethical problems of his own (see [3:30](#)), Joab was a fierce and unrelenting warrior, at that time very loyal to David. One day while home, David seemed to have been enjoying a nap on the roof (compare [1 Samuel 9:25](#)). After waking, he began to walk around

the roof (2 Samuel 11:2).

The highest point in Jerusalem was Mount Zion. Next to the mount on the south side was David's palace, making his rooftop the second highest position in the small city (probable size: about 2,000 people within 12 acres). This is how David could have observed activity on a nearby rooftop (2 Samuel 11:2b).

What David saw was the woman Bathsheba performing a ritual bath for purification (see 2 Samuel 11:4; compare Leviticus 15:19–24). David may have known Bathsheba's family, for her father was Eliam, thought to be the son of one of David's counselors Ahithophel (see 2 Samuel 11:3; 15:12; 16:23).

King David's notice of Bathsheba quickly turned to lust. He ended up sleeping with her, which resulted in a pregnancy (2 Samuel 11:5). David tried to influence her husband, Uriah, to go to his own house before returning to battle. That way everyone (except David and Bathsheba) would think that the baby was Uriah's. But Uriah's sense of honor kept him from spending time with his wife (11:6–13). Little did Uriah know that his sense of honor sealed his fate (11:14–17), as he carried his own death warrant back to Joab. After Uriah's death, David took Bathsheba as his own wife.

Nine months later, it looked as though David had gotten away with these crimes.

I. Tale of Two Men

(2 SAMUEL 12:1–6)

A. Contrasting Fortunes (vv. 1–3)

1a. The LORD sent Nathan to David.

Biblical narratives often present people's actions without offering God's evaluation of their deeds. But the writer of 2 Samuel could not resist the arresting understatement, "The thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (11:27).

Nothing is known of the prophet *Nathan* other than what is recorded in conjunction with David's reign (2 Samuel 7; 1 Kings 1; 1 Chronicles 29:29). Prophets existed in Israel's history before the monarchy, but their number and role seem to have increased after a human king was enthroned. True prophets were called directly by *the Lord* (example: Jeremiah 7:1–8). Among their important roles was to hold Israel's civil authorities in check (examples: 1 Samuel 13:11–14; 1 Kings 21:17–29). All in all, the prophet Nathan demonstrated respect for the Lord's anointed and fear of the Lord that led him to take on a potentially suicidal mission before *David*.

1b. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor.

Nathan could have chosen a more direct approach to confronting David, but he chose to start with a parable. Old Testament prophets often used metaphors and symbolism to speak against evil in their nation (examples: [Isaiah 5:1–7](#); [Jeremiah 2:20–30](#)) or even to entrap the king with his own ruling ([2 Samuel 14:1–20](#); [1 Kings 20:35–43](#)).

The description of *two men in a certain town* primed David for a story of conflict. The fact that *one [was] rich and the other poor* further heightened the likelihood of conflict, especially of injustice based on disparity of power.

What Do You Think?

How can a story help prepare a person to face a confrontation?

Digging Deeper

In what situations is this technique appropriate?

2–3a. “The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing

Since farm animals were an indication of wealth (example: [1 Samuel 25:2](#)), the difference in power and status between the two men was made more apparent from the description of what both men possessed. Nathan’s choice of *sheep and cattle* as the principal indicator of wealth likely resonated with David, who grew up working as a shepherd for his family ([16:11](#); [2 Samuel 7:8](#)). It also set up the potential conflict between the two as more emotional than if only gold was at stake.

3b. “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.

With expert rhetorical flair, Nathan piled on more detail about the nearness and dearness of the *one little ewe lamb* to the poor man. David had protected his father’s sheep fiercely ([1 Samuel 17:34–35](#)). Nathan’s story would have stirred David’s sympathies even before the crime was revealed.

Nathan’s story also contains hints at its meaning. That the sheep *slept in the man’s arms* alludes to David’s holding Bathsheba ([2 Samuel 11:4](#)). That the sheep *was like a daughter to him* also hints at Bathsheba, whose name means something like “daughter of abundance.” For those in the know, it’s obvious what Nathan is getting at—but still not to David (see [12:5–6](#), below).

B. Blatant Injustice (v. 4)

4. “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.”

In the days before hotels and restaurants, it was unremarkable for a *traveler* to seek room and board from a private citizen. Any virtuous person, wealthy or not, in the ancient world practiced hospitality to prevent a stranger from becoming the victim of violence (examples: [Genesis 19:1–11](#); [Judges 19:16–28](#)).

The *rich man* followed convention by preparing a meal for the visitor (compare [Genesis 19:3](#); [Judges 19:20–21](#)). But such hospitality, he may have reasoned (falsely), was the responsibility of the whole town, and not just himself. He therefore confiscated the poor man’s *ewe lamb* for the occasion. No one hearing the story would believe that the man was justified in this, especially given the wealth disparity between the two citizens.

What Do You Think?

What prevents you from taking advantage of others based on your relative privilege?

Digging Deeper

Instead of simply not taking advantage, what verses guide you in actively blessing others?

C. Angry Verdict (vv. 5–6)

5. David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die!

The differences in status and resources between the two men, combined with the rich man’s heartless action, made the guilt of the rich man appallingly clear. David’s initial instinct as judge was to pass the death sentence on the man for his egregious behavior, which ironically would be appropriate for both adultery and murder ([Exodus 21:12](#); [Leviticus 20:10](#)), but not theft ([Exodus 22:1–15](#); exceptions: [21:16](#); [22:2](#)).

6. “He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

Perhaps realizing that death was not a prescribed punishment for the theft of a *lamb*, no matter how precious, David gave a more realistic verdict. Fourfold recompense is the stipulated penalty in [Exodus 22:1](#) for stealing a sheep.

David did not realize that he had stepped on a land mine that Nathan had planted. The psychological concept of projection can give some insight into David’s words here. Though he was not consciously thinking of his own sin, he could harshly rebuke someone else exhibiting the same kind of behavior. This suggests that David subconsciously was quite aware of his guilt and felt the shame of his actions but had not yet confessed it to himself or the Lord (see [2](#)

Samuel 12:13a, below).

What Do You Think?

Why might you be inclined to judge someone more harshly for sins that you also struggle against?

Digging Deeper

How can you remove the “plank” from your eye in order to help with the “speck” in another’s (Matthew 7:3)?

II. Tale of the King

(2 SAMUEL 12:7–9)

A. The Guilty One (v. 7a)

7a. Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”

Clues in the surrounding text indicate that this conversation between *Nathan* and *David* took place months after the offenses occurred (see [Lesson Context](#)), on the occasion of the child’s birth (see 2 Samuel 12:14–15, below). By then David had had time to rationalize his sins away and bury them in his mind. But try as he might, he could not forget what he had done, and he now stood exposed before an all-knowing, all-seeing God (Psalms 11:4–7; 139:7–12). David himself was the rich *man*.

AM I GUILTY?

“Remember, we frequently have children on campus, so we all need to slow down in our driveway and parking lot.” I nodded in agreement as I read the email from the facilities manager. I had seen coworkers driving too fast around the road that curved to our office. I tried to suppress my irritation. *Why can’t they just slow down?*

A few days later I pulled into the parking lot in a rainstorm. I saw headlights in my rearview mirror as I parked. The facilities manager was leaning his head out of the window as I stood in the rain.

“David, you need to slow down,” he said.

Flabbergasted, I mumbled an apology and retreated inside. It had never once entered my mind that the warning email might apply to *me*. But I was guilty.

Why is it so hard to judge ourselves? The next time you encounter a call for changed behavior, put yourself in the hot seat. Are you guilty?

—D. G.

B. The Blessed One (vv. 7b–8)

7b. “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.’”

Nathan reminded David of the favor that the Lord had shown him (see [Lesson Context](#), above; see also [lesson 2](#)). Very clearly he must have remembered the day he was summoned from the pasture to be *anointed* as *king* ([1 Samuel 16:1–13](#)). He also could not forget his years of fleeing from *Saul* ([21:10](#); [23:7–8](#); etc.).

8. “‘I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more.’”

For a new king to assume possession of the former king’s *wives* as well as his *house* was the apparent custom of the day. This does not mean that David married the women but, instead, that they were part of the package deal now under his control of *Israel* and *Judah* as Saul’s successor ([2 Samuel 5:1–5](#)). David’s acquisition of Saul’s harem was thus a blessing representing God’s giving him the kingship.

And the list of blessings does not stop there! God gave David the promise of an ongoing dynasty and a name like the greatest men on earth ([2 Samuel 7:9](#)). How much more could David possibly want? And *if all this had been too little*, the Lord had more to give!

C. The Ungrateful One (v. 9)

9a. “‘Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes?’”

Disobeying *the Lord* in the face of such extravagant evidence of favor was a wicked, sinful betrayal. In the course of events, David had violated the foundational commandments against coveting, adultery, and murder ([Exodus 20:13–14, 17](#)).

9b. “‘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.’”

For the first time, Nathan named *Uriah the Hittite*. He called Bathsheba only *Uriah’s wife*, not by her own name, emphasizing that David *took* a *wife* who was not his to take (see [2 Samuel 12:15](#), below; compare [Matthew 1:6](#)).

The consequences listed in [2 Samuel 12:10–11](#) (not in today’s printed text) fit the crime (see also [2 Samuel 12:14](#), below). Because David had Uriah murdered by *the sword of the Ammonites*, the sword—representing military violence—would torment his own household (see fulfillment in [13:29](#); [18:14](#); [1 Kings 2:24–25](#)). Since he took the wife of another man to be his own, someone close to him would now take his wives (see fulfillment in [2 Samuel 16:21–22](#)).

III. Moving Beyond the Tales

(2 SAMUEL 12:13–15)

A. Confession (v. 13a)

13a. Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

Prophets often spoke truth to power only to find that power was not willing to listen (examples: 1 Kings 18:16–18; Jeremiah 36:1–26) or made excuses (example: 1 Samuel 15:13–21). But unlike Saul before him, *David* offered no excuses. Nor did he lash out at *Nathan* for denouncing him. Instead, he confessed the awful truth in the plainest language. Had he not *sinned* first *against the Lord*, the rest—Uriah, Bathsheba, and the countless others who would be affected by the consequences of his actions—would not have become his victims.

David was anointed king because he was a man after God’s own heart (compare Acts 13:22). His confession here is surely one indication of why. Contrasting David with a later king, the Lord said that David had “followed me with all his heart, doing only what was right in my eyes” (1 Kings 14:8). Similar statements about David’s wholehearted devotion to the Lord come in other comparisons (9:4; 11:6; 2 Kings 14:3; 18:3; 22:2). Only once later did the Lord add the qualifier, “except in the case of Uriah the Hittite” (1 Kings 15:5).

This should hearten the believer who continues to struggle against sin; confession allows the heart to once again be fully devoted to the Lord. With this admission of sin, David would at last begin to unburden himself. He had felt the weight of his sin in his bones (Psalm 32:3–4). David went on to write a penitential prayer for cleansing and restoration (Psalm 51). Confession was the first step on the path to forgiveness for David, and is for us (1 John 1:9).



Visual for [Lesson 10](#). Allow one minute of self-examination for any unconfessed sins for which participants need to repent.

B. Mercy (v. 13b)

13b. Nathan replied, “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.

David deserved to die for his crimes (see [2 Samuel 12:5](#), above). But *the Lord* once again showed himself to be compassionate, gracious, and forgiving of transgression and sin (compare [Exodus 34:6–7](#)). Even so, David would experience both punishment and consequence.

REMORSE

For my young daughter, stay-at-home orders represented her best defense against contracting COVID-19. She has chronic lung disease, so the virus could easily prove lethal for her. Even a simple cold could put her in the hospital, where she would be more at risk for exposure.

Her home-health nurses still reported for their usual 12-hour shifts. But when one nurse mentioned that her own child had a fever, my wife and I were alarmed. We asked the nurse to return home until everyone in her household had been symptom-free for two weeks.

It's possible that we would have kept her on if we were comfortable that she understood our concerns. But instead we parted ways with the nurse. King David modeled the humility we were looking for when he acknowledged his wrongdoing. This opened the door for forgiveness and renewal of his relationship with God. Can you follow David's example, or will you instead seek to justify yourself?

—D. G.

C. Consequences (vv. 14–15)

14. “But because by doing this you have shown utter contempt for the LORD, the son born to you will die.”

As king in Israel, David brought dishonor not only to himself but also to God. Not only had David's sin of adultery snowballed into murder; it would cause enemies who already displayed *utter contempt for the Lord* (and possibly even people within Israel) to blaspheme God all the more (compare [Matthew 18:6–7](#))! Far from shepherding the people in greater faithfulness to their God, David had demonstrated blatant disregard for God's standards.

The death of this innocent *son* is stunning as a punishment for David's sin. But while it may seem to go against God's own declaration that he does not punish the child for the parent's sin ([Deuteronomy 24:16](#); [Ezekiel 18:20](#)), we need not assume that the child's death was a form of punishment for the baby. His death along with the record of Nathan's prophecy would be concrete evidence to the nation that the Lord saw David's sin and took it seriously. This example would, ideally, cause them to take their own sins seriously, knowing that God did not spare even his chosen king from discipline.

What Do You Think?

How do open secrets concerning a person's sins harm communities in which that person participates?

Digging Deeper

How can bringing those secrets to light help heal the damage?

15. After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill.

Bathsheba is again referred to as *Uriah's wife* to highlight the depravity of David's acts (see [2 Samuel 12:9b](#), above). For the next seven days, David would watch and pray as *the child* sick-

ened and eventually died (12:16–20).

A sense of God’s mercy and forgiveness would come with Solomon’s birth (2 Samuel 12:24–25). He continued the royal line that led to Jesus (Matthew 1:6–7). Through the prophet Nathan, the Lord confronted David. But the Lord did not give up on David or his enduring dynasty (1 Kings 11:38; Jeremiah 23:5–6; Acts 2:29–31).

What Do You Think?

How do you guard against reading every negative consequence of your actions as a punishment from God?

Digging Deeper

How can you minister to others who fear that God is most often angry with them?

Conclusion

A. Accountability

There is always a temptation when reading a story to put oneself in the shoes of the hero. *I* would run into a burning building to save a child. *I* would step in if I saw blatant discrimination in front of me. Of course I would be Nathan, confronting the sins of the powerful.

But there is much to be gained by resisting the urge to identify with the hero. And if we’re being honest, we are frequently more like David than a hero. We think our sins have passed by without consequence, that maybe even God didn’t notice. We squash any gnawing guilt. If no consequences manifest themselves, we must have been forgiven!

Let David’s story warn us against such attitudes. Our sins have consequences in others’ lives. And sins we ignore instead of confess harden our hearts to other sins, making us complicit in the wickedness of others.

The tendency to abuse our own influence must constantly be held in check. We must be willing not only to hold others to account but also to listen when Christian brothers and sisters do the same for us. By doing so we will fulfill the words of Christ: “First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:5).

B. Prayer

Father, give us the boldness to speak truth to power and the humility to recognize our need for accountability. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Confess your sins and turn
to the Lord.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Mention a public figure who was caught in a crime or scandal (example: Jeffrey Epstein’s sex trafficking). Invite the whole group to outline the main details of the case. Ask for reactions when class member heard of this person’s arrest. Ask if the outcome seemed satisfactory or not to most. As a transition, note that today’s text leads us to consider a bigger, behind-the-scenes picture of scandals and crimes.

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read aloud **2 Samuel 12:1–6**. Divide into small groups to “modernize” the story that Nathan told in order to set David up (example: instead of a sheep, perhaps it could be a family’s dog or cat that is taken). Have groups read their modifications in the ensuing whole-class discussion. Give a token prize to the most creative recasting of the story. Then pose this question for discussion: “What response to Nathan’s description of David’s misdeed would you consider just in our time?”

Ask a volunteer to read aloud **2 Samuel 12:7–9, 13–15**. Distribute handouts (you prepare) to groups you designate as **David’s Deeds** (for considering **12:7–9**) and **King’s Confession** (for considering **12:3–15**). Have groups “grade” Nathan or David from A+ to F– regarding the thoroughness of each man’s declaration. (*Option.* If you wish, you can also include a third group to do the same with **7:10–12**, not in today’s printed text.)

Allow groups time to discuss and formulate their grades. As each group presents and defends its grading in the ensuing whole-class discussion, encourage the other group(s) to be contrarian and challenge the grading. Invite participants to summarize the characters of Nathan and David, as reflected in the text.

Option. Distribute to study pairs copies of the “Saul vis-à-vis David” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Instruct learners to compare and contrast the two

accounts as they complete the exercise as indicated.

Into Life

Invite participants to cross-reference today's passage with [Psalm 51](#), the song David wrote in association with his repentance. Ask three volunteers to read it aloud in sections: [Psalm 51:1–6](#), [7–13](#), and [14–19](#). Play, sing, or read the lyrics of the hymn “Whiter than Snow” or praise song that is similar to this psalm. Encourage participants to read [Psalm 51](#) throughout the week ahead and make it a personal prayer of confession, repentance, and restoration. (*Option.* To enhance this proposal, distribute copies of the “[Psalm 51](#)” exercise from the activity page, which you can download, to be completed as a take-home.)

Form pairs or triads of learners to think of a modern scenario that would call for the kind of confrontation that Nathan used and prepare a role play for the class in that regard. Be prepared to give some hints to groups that are struggling with the assignment.

After all pairs or triads have performed their brief role plays, pose the following questions (write them on the board) for whole-class discussion:

What kinds of situations call for Nathan's type of confrontation?

In what kinds of situations would Nathan's technique be ineffective?

In what kinds of situations would Nathan's technique be seen as downright manipulative?

Tip: Do not write all three questions on the board at once. Write the second question only after the discussion has run its course on the first; similarly, write the third question only after the discussion has run its course on the second. Allow periods of silence to run 15 seconds—don't jump in to fill silence too quickly!