

## “Tell It Slant”

### The Prophet and the King (Part 3)

As we resume reading David's story today, David is still determined to put the whole matter of Bathsheba behind him. And like many a powerful person before and since, he uses the powers of his office to orchestrate a cover-up. The first step—which we read about last week—was to eliminate her husband, Uriah, by setting him up to be killed on the battlefield. The fact that he implicated his general, Joab, in his crime seemed not to matter to him. And in a way, turning Joab into a co-conspirator provided some extra insurance to keep the general from talking. And now, he comes in like a white knight and marries Uriah's beautiful, pregnant widow.

In the eyes of the public, how could this do anything but to add a bit more shine to David's stellar reputation? He honors a fallen hero, and provides a secure future for the family he left behind. Even in David's own mind, there may have been a little room to pat himself on the back for at least doing the right thing by Bathsheba and their son.

David's carefully constructed defenses remind me of one way that powerful people protect themselves these days—through the firewalls their computer experts create to protect their computer networks. And David's firewall is impressive. He has maintained his public image. He has effectively silenced the few people who know the real story. And, knowing human nature,

he has undoubtedly found ways to excuse himself for his crimes. You know: it was a weak moment; I'm not really that sort of person; things like that.

Otherwise, how would he have been able to look at himself in the mirror?

So who, or what, would ever be able to hack that firewall? Who could possibly get past those carefully laid defenses?

This is where Nathan the prophet comes back in. And this time he doesn't wait for an invitation to speak to the king. But still how does one speak the word of the Lord to the most powerful person in the land? Any hacker worth his or her paycheck would know that a frontal assault against this firewall would be useless. So the Lord sends Nathan to David to tell him a little story about a man and his pet lamb.

In a book in which he writes about the parables in the Bible, Eugene Peterson, quotes a bit of poetry from Emily Dickinson:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased  
With Explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind –

The poet's point is that we aren't always able to hear the truth if it comes at us too directly. The light of truth—as wonderful and glorious as it may be—is too much for us to look at straight on. And so if we are to get a glimpse of it we need to look at it more indirectly—like an outfielder learns how to play a fly ball

in a brilliant sun-filled sky by approaching it from an angle. Because the blinding light of the sun is too much to take straight on.

And so it is for the full truth of the word of God. So, Jesus, the great master teacher, often taught in stories and parables. A story about a man and his two sons, or story about a man who gets attacked along the road, or a story about a scoundrel who uses his master's money to make friends for himself—stories that may begin innocently but have a way of upending our expectations and surprising us with some new truth about God and his ways.

And so Nathan comes to David with this story. As he begins, this may have sounded like to David a bit of routine royal business. In ancient monarchies the king often served as the final court of appeals in judicial cases. And as Nathan launches into this story about this man and his lamb, it may have seemed like that was what he was doing.

But Nathan proves himself to be master storyteller. He gives David two characters—a rich man and a poor man. A man who has everything and a man who has nothing. A man with great power, and a man with no power. And then he tells in loving detail about the poor man's one prized possession—his precious little lamb that was like a child to him. We can hardly listen to the story without our hearts going out to him. But then, this rich man, who probably had thousands of lambs, comes along and takes the little lamb from the poor man and serves it up for lunch. Just like that.

David is taken in by this story, too. And suddenly David's conscience is on fire. His sense of moral outrage is so intense that he's ready to execute that rich man. We don't really know, by the way, whether there ever really was a man like this, or whether Nathan has made the story up. But the story, by coming at it slant, slips past David's firewall. It reawakens his hardened heart in a way that no direct confrontation ever could have.

There is a time, after the story has done its work, for Nathan to tell things straight, too. Now that David is all aflame with righteous indignation, Nathan lets the other shoe drop. "You are the man." God has given you everything, and you still took Bathsheba away from her husband and used her for your own gratification. And then to make it even worse you turned around and murdered Uriah!

Nathan goes on, in a stunning way, to spell out all the consequences that will flow from David's sins. David's own wives will be subjected to the things that David did to Bathsheba—but in the broad daylight. And when the Lord says that "the sword shall never depart from [David's] house," he's saying that conflict will continue to tear David's family apart for generations to come. I don't think that we should think of this as some sort of "family curse"—in other words, that it's something the Lord will do directly to David's family. These are patterns of behavior that David's sons will learn from his example and will be repeated over and over again, generation after generation.

It leaves Israel under the kings with two founding principles: From chapter 7 we have the Lord's covenant with David to establish his throne forever—to work through David's family to accomplish his promise made to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth. And from chapter 12 we have his warning that despite that promise his family will be plagued with troubles that will at times seem to derail God's plan altogether. The story of Israel through the rest of the Old Testament will revolve around the tension between these two things.

The closest analogy that comes to my mind is the story of our nation. On the one hand, we are guided by a set of principles enshrined in the writings of our founders—some would even say that they are a reflection of a divine purpose. But on the other hand, through the centuries we have also borne the burden of the other side of our founding—the way our ancestors confiscated this land from the native population, and the way they laid the foundations of its economy on the enslavement of millions of men, women, and children. And still today, after almost four centuries, we see signs of this two-fold legacy every day.

Under the burden of all that the Lord has said through Nathan, David's heart breaks, and in the simplest possible way, he confesses his sin. "I have sinned against the Lord," is all he has to say. And Nathan brings words of assurance, "Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die." You shall not receive the full measure for what you have done.

There's no cheap grace here. David's heart is really broken. This wasn't just about saying "sorry" to get it over with. The book of Psalms connects this story with Psalm 51, probably the most deeply penitential prayer in the Bible.

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.  
For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
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 judgment ...

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

How secure have we made our spiritual firewalls? How able are we to hear the word of God? To hear all the truth about ourselves? Not just the happy stuff, but to let God in to the places that need healing and forgiveness?

As a matter of course, after the Scripture readings on Sunday I offer a short prayer for illumination—in many churches that prayer comes before the readings instead. It may seem like a formality, but it recognizes that we need the Holy Spirit's power at work in us to hear the Word of God—to lower our firewalls and let it in—to be perceptive enough to grasp it when it comes at us slant—to

have grace to behold its glory. To have the courage to hear the truth and let it disrupt our lives with God's healing grace.

So let's give thanks to the Lord who tells us the truth—and who tells it slant.

Amen.

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