

“Responding to the Consequences of Sin”
2 Samuel 12:1-31
March 7, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We come tonight to Second Samuel chapter twelve for a third and final time.

In chapter eleven we have the serious moral failing of David, as he commits adultery with Bathsheba, and then, to cover up his sin, he commits murder against Uriah, her husband, in a way that callously leads to the deaths of other soldiers under his command as well.

Then, in chapter twelve, God sends Nathan the prophet to David.

We have considered first the role of Nathan’s confrontation. Then we considered the content of David’s confession. Tonight we will look at how David responds to the consequences of his sin.

With that in mind, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening:

12:1 And the LORD [Yahweh] sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. 2The rich man had very many flocks and herds, 3but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. 4Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” 5Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As Yahweh lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, 6and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

7Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. 8And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. 9Why have you despised the word of Yahweh, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. 10Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ 11Thus says Yahweh, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. 12For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.’” 13David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against Yahweh.” And Nathan said to David, “Yahweh also has put away your sin; you shall not die. 14Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned Yahweh, the child who is born to you shall die.” 15 Then Nathan went to his house.

And Yahweh afflicted the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and he became sick. 16David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. 17 And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. 18 On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, “Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us. How then can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm.” 19 But when David saw that his servants were whispering together,

David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, “Is the child dead?” They said, “He is dead.” ²⁰ Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of Yahweh and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate. ²¹ Then his servants said to him, “What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate food.” ²² He said, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, ‘Who knows whether Yahweh will be gracious to me, that the child may live?’” ²³ But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.”

²⁴ Then David comforted his wife, Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her, and she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon. And Yahweh loved him ²⁵ and sent a message by Nathan the prophet. So he called his name Jedidiah, because of Yahweh.

²⁶ Now Joab fought against Rabbah of the Ammonites and took the royal city. ²⁷ And Joab sent messengers to David and said, “I have fought against Rabbah; moreover, I have taken the city of waters. ²⁸ Now then gather the rest of the people together and encamp against the city and take it, lest I take the city and it be called by my name.” ²⁹ So David gathered all the people together and went to Rabbah and fought against it and took it. ³⁰ And he took the crown of their king from his head. The weight of it was a talent of gold, and in it was a precious stone, and it was placed on David's head. And he brought out the spoil of the city, a very great amount. ³¹ And he brought out the people who were in it and set them to labor with saws and iron picks and iron axes and made them toil at the brick kilns. And thus he did to all the cities of the Ammonites. Then David and all the people returned to Jerusalem.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Introduction

We come this evening to the rest of chapter twelve. And as we do, we come to the consequences of David's sin, and see how David responds to those consequences.

As we look at that tonight, I want to focus on three things.

The first is the complexity of earthly suffering.

Second is the right perspective on earthly suffering.

Third is the right response to earthly suffering.

I. The Complexity of Earthly Suffering

So first comes the complexity of earthly suffering.

And that might seem like an odd place to start, because at first glance the suffering here seems simple and straightforward, doesn't it? David sinned and God has disciplined him by taking his son. But as soon as we acknowledge that others are affected by these events, things become more complicated.

And a helpful way to think that through and to consider our own tendencies when interpreting suffering, may be to consider the major frameworks that exist in the world regarding the causes of suffering, and the appropriate responses to suffering.

In his book *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, Tim Keller catalogues five major perspectives on the causes, responses, and resolutions for suffering, from both traditional and modern cultures. [Keller, 17-31]

The first major view is the moralistic view. This sees suffering as caused by our specific sins. The response we are called to is to receive the suffering, and to do good. Then, when we have done enough good and suffered enough to atone for our sins, we can be released to eternal bliss.

It can be tempting to see this framework as describing David's situation, but there are a few issues with that.

First of all, David is not really atoning for his sins. His sins deserved death, as Nathan pointed out and as David himself admitted. So David's suffering here is not actually enough to pay the price of his sins.

And that fact draws the important distinction between punishment and discipline. Punishment is a price paid for a moral debt. Discipline is God's corrective action in the life of his children to bring them to repentance and to sanctify them. This suffering is an act of discipline in David's life. But it doesn't pay for any of his sins. It is not punitive punishment, but it is fatherly discipline. And so, while David's suffering has a good bit in common with the moralistic view, it also has some significant differences. And David knows that. He knows he is not getting what he deserves.

But the moralistic view immediately falls apart when we look beyond David. It falls apart when we look to David's son, who is ill.

There is no reason to believe that this child has committed a specific sin to warrant an early death – at least not more than any other human who did not die early. And David does not believe that the issue lies with his son either, for he is convinced that his son has God's favor.

In verse twenty-three David says, "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." David is confident that his son is with the Lord. He does not believe that God rejected his son, nor does he imply that there was anything uniquely wicked about his son.

David's words about his son show us that he does not view suffering simply through a moralistic framework.

Second, among the major views of suffering in the world, there is the self-transcendent framework. This view sees suffering as an illusion. The proper response to suffering is detachment, and the hope is eventual enlightenment.

But David clearly does not follow that model either. David does not detach himself from the suffering of his son, but he prays and fasts day and night, on the ground, before the Lord. David cares deeply about what happens to his son – so much so that his servants are afraid to tell him when the boy dies.

Suffering in this world is real – it is not an illusion. And the response modeled for us here, and throughout the Bible, is not stoic detachment.

A third common perspective on suffering is the fatalistic view. This view says that what God or the fates have willed, they have willed. Our goal is not to understand, but to simply accept God's will without question and endure the hardships he ordains for us.

But that's not really David's response either. Even after being told by the prophet Nathan, when David's son falls ill, David does not just accept the boy's impending death as God's will – but he pleads with God. He petitions God day and night to change his mind. He knows that faithfulness is not simple resignation, but it is engagement with the Lord, pleading with the Lord, even while being willing to say in the end "thy will be done." David is not fatalistic, but prayerful.

A fourth common perspective on suffering is the dualistic perspective. This sees suffering as the result of a cosmic conflict between forces of darkness and light where neither is completely in control. We are called to be faithful to the cause of good and hope for the triumph of the light.

But David never questions here that God is in control. God is the one who has brought this suffering into David's life, not some outside force. And the question is whether God will decide to relent, not whether God is able to save the boy. David knows that good and evil are at work in his heart and life, and that there is a battle. But he never has the illusion that it is a battle between equals, or that God is not in control.

The fifth and final major view on suffering is the secular view. It sees suffering as accidental. The proper response is better techniques to avoid and end suffering, and the hope is a better world in which human beings can prevent all suffering.

And while it's a bit anachronistic, we should note that David does not take this perspective either. He does not see his son's suffering as an accident, but as something that happened under the control of a sovereign God. And he knows that the solution will not be a better technique. His hope is not in man, but in God.

Now, as we consider all this, we should acknowledge that, of course, in many ways David's suffering here is unique. He has had a prophet of the Lord come and tell him what was going to happen and why it was going to happen: his son would die as discipline for David's sin.

So we know that for David, this suffering has come into his life in order to push him to repentance and greater faithfulness – to bring about change in his life for his spiritual good. That is why this suffering comes into the life of David.

But what about the boy? If God works all things for good in the lives of his people, then how is this sickness and death at work for the good of the boy?

We don't know. And neither does David. It remains a mystery.

And the same is true for many other people alluded to in this chapter. Nathan's words in verse ten through twelve describe a lot of other suffering that will come not only to David, but to those around him. And we are never told what God's purposes are in their lives for the suffering that will come to them.

In other words, while the cause and intended effect of the suffering in David's life is supernaturally revealed to him, much of the suffering described and prophesied in this chapter is just like the suffering we experience; beyond David, we are not told what God's purpose is in the suffering he will bring into their lives.

For some people, if they do not know the Lord, God may be either calling them to himself, or bringing judgment upon them. For others, who do know him, God may be bringing fatherly discipline into their lives. For still others, God may be bringing suffering into their lives not primarily to grow or correct them, but to prove and reveal their faithfulness to him. As in the case of Job, God may be displaying the perseverance of their faith in all circumstances. In still other cases, God may have other intentions for the suffering of his people to testify to their faith for the sake of his kingdom – to be a witness to those who do not yet know him. And then in other situations, God's purpose in their suffering may be something else unknowable to us. Humanly speaking there is no way to know what God's goals were for David's son, in ending his life so early. And that is hardly the only case that must remain a mystery to us.

When suffering comes into our lives, we must consider whether there is anywhere in our lives where we need to repent, and if there is, we should do so. But ordinarily, we cannot know for sure why God brings suffering into our lives. Surely the Bible gives us many pictures of people who suffer fatherly discipline for their sins. But it also gives us many pictures like Job, and the prophets, and the apostles, and Jesus, who suffered for their faithfulness. Sometimes our suffering is discipline. Other times it displays our faith. And still other times it is just a mystery. As Solomon says: “¹⁴There is a vapor¹ that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vapor.” A couple verses later he adds: “¹⁷then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.” [Ecclesiastes 8:14,17]

David may know God's purpose for suffering in his life. But he doesn't know what God is doing in the lives of others. And yet, even in those cases where he does not know, David resists the five non-Christian frameworks for suffering. He resists the moralistic, the self-transcendent, the fatalistic, the dualistic, and the secular perspectives. He holds on in faith to the fact that all things, even our suffering, is superintended by our good and loving and all-powerful Heavenly Father.

We are called to do the same thing. But we should acknowledge the ways that we are often pulled towards those five non-Christian perspectives. And we are often tempted to them because each has an element of truth. The problem is that they present a piece of the truth as a whole – which makes it a lie.

The moralistic perspective is right that sin does lie at the heart of the suffering of this world. But it is wrong in saying that each instance of suffering comes from specific sins, that suffering is distributed in proportion to our sin, or that our suffering can ever atone for our sin. And we know this, yet we can often find ourselves slipping into a moralistic framework when it comes to thinking about suffering.

The self-transcendent view is right that we can wrongly see suffering in this life as greater than it actually is, and that we can become too attached to transient things of this world. But it is wrong

¹ Marginal ESV translation. See ESV footnote to Ecclesiastes 1:2.

in saying that worldly suffering is nothing – merely an illusion, or that we are called to total detachment from this world. God made this world for us, and we are to love it in its proper place. And suffering is a reality – as Jesus himself experienced it.

The fatalistic view is right that we are called to trust in God’s purposes and persevere through hardships with confidence in him. But it is wrong in effectively discouraging us from pleading with God in prayer. Again and again in the Scriptures, prayer is not *only* God’s people accepting God’s will, but it is God’s people fervently pleading with God for him to act in a certain way, even as they trust him no matter what. Christian faith is not fatalistic, but pleads its case before God.

The dualistic view is right in that there is a cosmic battle between good and evil in this world, and that that war can cause suffering in our lives. But it is wrong to see it as a battle between equals, and it is wrong if it says that God is not in total control of every aspect of this world and of our lives – including our suffering.

And the secular view is right that often suffering can be the result of incompetence, and often making the right use of what God has given us can reduce suffering for ourselves and for others. But it is wrong to see suffering as being purely accidental or for placing all our hope in human ingenuity.

How are you tempted towards these different non-Christian views?

David clings to the complexity and the mystery of the God who is held out for us in the Scripture, refusing a simple but false understanding of human suffering. We are called to do the same. That’s the first thing we see here from David.

II. The Right Perspective on Earthly Suffering

The second thing for us to see is the right perspective on earthly suffering.

And in our text, this can be seen and applied both in terms of suffering in general and suffering that, as in David’s case, is the direct result of sin.

Let’s consider it first from the perspective of earthly suffering in general.

As we’ve already noted, one thing that comes across clearly in our text is that earthly struggles matter. The lives and health of our loved ones matter. The life of his son certainly mattered to David. I mean, David totally fails to show good presbyterian restraint here. He throws himself on the floor before God, pleading with him for the life of his son, refusing to get up or to eat. You cannot look at David and conclude that he was just so heavenly minded that he did not care about what happened to those he loved in this world.

But at the very same time, you also cannot argue that David cared too much about the losses of this world – that he made an idol out of them in these verses. For, when he hears that his son has died, David does not despair, he does not give up hope, but he accepts the Lord’s will. David sees both that this world matters, and that eternity matters more. He can both long to experience God’s favor and blessing in the things of this world, while finding full comfort when they are denied to him, because his ultimate hope is in eternity. And so he says: “I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.”

In this, David shows us a right perspective on earthly suffering in general.

God made this world and gave to us. It is good and it matters. Our suffering in this life is real, and it too matters.

But eternity matters even more. And the eternal weight of glory that awaits us makes the suffering of this life to seem like a light momentary affliction by comparison.

It is not either/or – we do not choose to care about concern for this life or the next one. Our call instead is to rightly order our concerns and our loves and our hopes. We care for both, but there is no question that eternal concerns, loves, and hopes should vastly out-rank our concerns, loves, and hopes for the things of this life.

In that way, David shows us in general how we must view our earthly suffering in right perspective.

But he also gives us a more specific picture. He shows us the right perspective for earthly suffering that is directly caused by our sin.

Ordinarily, losing a son, as David does, would be a situation where we could not know with certainty what God's purposes are – as we have already said. But in David's case, he has been told by God. This suffering is a direct result of David's sin.

And we can have many such examples of sin our lives.

When we betray someone close to us, we will suffer long-term effects in that relationship. When we fail to invest in an important relationship, we will suffer the weakening or loss of that relationship. When we are sinful with our money, we may suffer financial hardships as a result. When we lie, we may suffer the loss of trust. When we break the law, we may suffer legal consequences. And so on. There are many ways our sins can have direct consequences in our lives.

What is the right perspective for us to have on that?

Again, David helps us with that. He knows that God has taken his son as an earthly consequence for his sin. He knows from the prophet Nathan that additional earthly consequences are on the way. He knows that God is sovereign over those consequences – actually in his case God tells him that he – that God – is the one who is bringing them about.

What is striking then, is that though David knows that, he does not doubt God's eternal forgiveness towards him.

While we certainly know the difference between earthly consequences for our sin, and eternal consequences for our sin, it can be remarkably easy to mis-order them in our minds when we conclude what God really thinks of us.

It is easy for us to look at the suffering God has allowed as a result of our sin, and to determine that he does not love us, or at least that he is still mad at us. But David doesn't do that.

Nathan declared to David "Yahweh has put away your sin." And there is no indication that David doubts that here.

David pleads with the Lord because, he says, he thinks God may relent. He therefore assumes God will still hear his pleas, and he therefore must really believe that God has forgiven him.

When the boy has died, David does not respond by assuming that this means that God has not forgiven him. Instead, David goes in and worships the Lord. He is confident that he can draw close to God.

Then, in verse twenty-three, one implication we can miss is that as David is confident that his son has gone to be with the Lord, so he is confident that he too will one day go to be with the Lord.

In other words, when David sinned grievously, and confessed his sin, after that he had two major data points to determine God's disposition towards him. One was the earthly consequences for his sin that the Lord had brought into his life. The other was the word of God through the prophet declaring that David had been forgiven.

Our tendency, so often, is to look to the first. Because our sin has consequences, because suffering has come into our lives, because the Lord is disciplining us with the earthly consequences of our sins, we can conclude that God must still be mad at us – that God has not forgiven us.

But that is not the right perspective. The right perspective is seen in David.

David believes the declaration of pardon he hears from Nathan so firmly, that though the Lord has brought serious earthly consequences for his sin, David does not doubt that God has forgiven him and will hear his prayers.

How do you struggle with that? How do you tend to put more faith in your own interpretation of your circumstances rather than in the word of God when it comes to believing whether God loves you, whether God forgives you, and whether God has embraced you again as his own?

Our calling is to a right perspective. Our calling is to trust the word of God above all else. And so, when we trust him and confess our sins, and his word says we are forgiven, then we are to believe him, and we are not to confuse earthly consequences for our sin with eternal ones.

That is the second thing we see here: David shows us a right perspective on earthly suffering.

III. Right Response to Earthly Suffering

Third, and finally, in our text we see the right response to earthly suffering.

Whatever the cause of our suffering, we are always called to respond to it by turning to the Lord, for strength, for comfort, and for help to follow him faithfully through the path he has called us to.

In cases where the Lord is bringing fatherly discipline into our lives, this especially means repentance. God's fatherly discipline is meant to call us to repent where we have gone astray. And that is exactly what we see David do here.

I know it's been a while, but we need to remember the pattern of David's sin back in chapter eleven. First of all, and most centrally, David pushed aside his relationship to the Lord. From there,

David stops loving the people around him as people the Lord has called him to serve, made in God's image, and instead he reduces them to things for him to use. David does not go out with his army but just sends Joab. David sees and then uses Bathsheba like an object for his own pleasure. David then disregards the life of Uriah and of his other men all while he sits comfortably in Jerusalem. This is the pattern of David's sin.

But here, in chapter twelve, David responds to the suffering the Lord has brought into his life – he responds to the consequences of his sin – by repenting of each of those patterns.

And so, whereas before David had pushed his relationship to the Lord aside, and so been willing to sin greatly against the Lord, in verse twenty we read that David's first response after the death of his son was to draw close to God in worship.

David begins by focusing himself on his relationship to God. He does not blame God for the suffering he has allowed into his life. But he also does not doubt that God will accept him. David rightly draws close to God again, rejecting bitterness, rejecting any doubt of God's love, but trusting in God's grace, he worships the Lord. This is the first step of David's repentance.

Second, David draws close to Bathsheba, in order to comfort her, in verse twenty-four. In chapter eleven David showed no concern for Bathsheba's wellbeing. He treated her as an object for his pleasure without concern for the effects it would have for her. He did not seem to even concern himself with how she would feel about the death of her husband. Though he took her as his wife after Uriah's death so that their child would be legitimately his, still, David showed cold disregard for Bathsheba. And now, after the death of their child, we should recognize that David could be tempted to do it again. He could be tempted to keep his distance. He could be tempted to continue to be cold toward her. But instead he draws close to her. He does not deny her her place as his wife, and he seeks to comfort her. David repents of his previous treatment of Bathsheba, and instead he loves her.

Third, David repents of his earlier sin towards his soldiers. In chapter eleven, David did not go out to battle with his men, he then committed adultery with the wife of one of his men, had that man killed, and was fine with that murder leading to the deaths of other faithful soldiers of his. David had disregarded the humanity of his men, and the service he owed them as their king.

But no more. Now, here in verses twenty-six through thirty-one, David, with the prompting of Joab, goes out to the battlefield again. He gathers other soldiers, and he joins those already in the field, and he leads them into battle. David repents of how he had treated his soldiers before.

And in each case of repentance, the Lord blessed David. When David drew close to God in worship in verse twenty, we see that the Lord had granted him peace by verse twenty-three. When David went in to comfort Bathsheba, we see that the Lord blessed them with another child by verse twenty-four. And when David went out to his men, the Lord granted him victory in verses twenty-nine and thirty.

It is easy to respond badly when we face suffering or earthly consequences for our sin. But David shows us the way we are called to. He shows us what it looks like to respond by clinging to the Lord, and repenting where we have sin. The picture of David here in the second half of chapter twelve is radically different from the picture of David in chapter eleven. What made the difference? The word of God spoken by Nathan, the confession spoken by David, the forgiveness given by God, and then the suffering David walked through as a result of his sin.

That was not an easy path for David. But it transformed him. And it saved him from the path of Saul – the path of destruction.

And we must be willing to walk in the same way. We must be willing to hear the Word of God, to confess our sins, and to believe in God's forgiveness. And even as we do, we must let the suffering the Lord brings into our lives – whether it is a direct result of our sin or not – to have the effect the Lord has intended for us: to call us to cling to him and to walk in his ways.

Where is the Lord calling you to do the same?

Where is the Lord calling you, through his word or through your suffering, to draw close to him and to walk in his ways?

Conclusion

In all of this, God is faithful.

For as much as we have spoken about David, it is God who is most at work here.

God sent Nathan to David. God confronted David with his word. God forgave David's sin. God used the suffering that came to David in order to draw him to fuller repentance.

That is all true on an individual level. But perhaps most encouraging is that at the very same time, God is at work at a kingdom-level as well. God continues to conquer his enemies, as we read in the battle of Rabbah. And God continues to develop his dynasty. For, in the midst of all this brokenness, Solomon was born. Solomon who would be the next great king. Solomon who would also be a flawed king.

But even so, Solomon who would bring us one step closer to our ultimate king – a king who would be without flaw, Jesus Christ.

And so, even now, though we, God's people, are so flawed ... in ways we can see and in ways we can't, God is still preparing his creation for the eternal reign of his Son.

Our sin can bring great suffering and heartache into our lives. Our sin can bring brokenness and destruction into this world.

But our sin can never thwart the work of God – either in our own lives or in this world. God has a purpose for his people. And God has a purpose for this world.

And he will accomplish that purpose because he loves us, and we are his.

Let that be our greatest comfort.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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