

MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE BIBLE #5

KING DAVID

By David Carlson

One of the most beloved figures in the Old Testament and the entire Bible is King David. In fact, the name “David” in Hebrew means “beloved.” In many ways, David lived up to his name. Stories of his youth—his killing the Philistine Goliath and his ability to charm with his musical abilities—are stories that have been told and retold throughout the long history of Judaism and Christianity.

And as king, David left behind a great legacy. He was the Israelite leader who turned Jerusalem into the capital of a powerful kingdom, an achievement that had such a profound effect on future generations that Jerusalem, to this day, is known as “the city of David.” Jesus, as was true of others, was honored to be called a “Son of David.”

But we will not understand the greatest achievement of King David if we do not remember that he was a very flawed man and king. In II Samuel, David has barely begun his reign when he fell in love with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his most loyal soldiers. In order to take her away from her husband to be one of his wives, David broke at least four of the Ten Commandments: you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not commit adultery, and you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. Worse yet, David committed all these sins without feeling an ounce of remorse until Nathan, the prophet of God, confronted him on what he has done.

Later, as a father, King David failed to protect the rights of his daughter Tamar which led ultimately to Absalom, David’s son, killing his half-brother and another son of the king. In the following years, Absalom even conspired to have David, his father, killed. That sad story ends with the death of Absalom, an outcome that left David a broken man.

In many ways, David’s story is a real mess. So why is David honored as the greatest king of Israel?

David is an excellent example of not judging another person solely from the outside. Without a doubt, King David sinned mightily and for all to see. Yet, David drew closer to God, more than anyone had to that point. How can that be—that a notorious sinner is close to God?

The answer, of course, is that David was not only a mighty sinner. He was also a sincere penitent (see Psalm 51). Our Lord will later make the point that the person, who is forgiven much, loves much. It is also true that the person, who is forgiven much, understands best the amazing mercy of God. David’s depth of sinfulness led him to plumb more deeply the depths of God’s forgiveness.

Consider how amazing is Psalm 23, perhaps the best-known Psalm written by King David.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His Name sake. Even though I walk through the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for Thou are with me; thy rod and your staff, they comfort me. Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anoints my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

What is astonishing about this Psalm is easy to miss. Before David’s time, the Israelites would more commonly talk about God as Israel’s Father, as our Shepherd. The language changes with King David. God is not only Israel’s Shepherd, but “my” Shepherd. God not only protects Israel from the shadow of death, but protects David as he walks through that shadow.

David is perhaps the first person in the Bible who understands that God does not only have a relationship with the nation, but with us as individuals. For David, the covenant is a personal one with a merciful God.

What led David to come to this understanding? Was he simply smarter than others? No, David came to know God as his personal God through his experiences of sinning, confessing, and being forgiven.

David is a model for all of us, but he is not alone. We remember Saint Mary of Egypt and other saints who, after sin-filled lives, were transformed by the overwhelming mercy of God. And through the sacrament of Confession, we too can experience this same mercy.

If we look up at the beautiful iconography of our Church, we can find King David among the prophets in our dome. But King David is also found on the left side in the icon of the Resurrection. Here stands David, a sinner and repentant, witnessing Jesus Christ's victory over sin and death. David is in that icon not because he was the perfect person or king, but because he was someone who humbly accepted the mercy of God.

Yes, King David, along with Adam and Eve, would have no trouble agreeing with what another great sinner, Saint Paul, would later write: Christ died for us according to the Scriptures and Christ is raised for us according to the Scriptures. Look again at David's serene face in the icon of the Resurrection. David knew the great secret, the good news of Jesus Christ, as a personal truth: David, by the grace of God, is one of the "us" for whom Christ died and was raised. May we know the same.