

Scripture Guide

2 Samuel 12 and Psalm 51

Biblical Context

Prior to Nathan's immediate appearance in the David and Bathsheba story in 2 Samuel 12, he is first introduced in the famous Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7. In this pericope,¹ God reveals to David that someone from his line will sit on the throne forever. However, it's important to remember that God spoke this promise to David *through* Nathan.

As we later see more clearly in 1 and 2 Kings, the role of the prophet was to serve as a counterbalance to the office of the king. This idea is briefly alluded to in the relationship between Samuel the judge and King Saul and more clearly fleshed out in Nathan the prophet and King David. The general picture was that God most often spoke directly to the prophets, not the kings. Thus prophets were to act as covenant-keeping watch dogs, making sure the kings and the nation spiritually and morally acted in line with God's will and word.²

As we also see later in 1 and 2 Kings, the role of the prophet was treated with disdain in Israel's history. Of all of the kings of Israel and Judah - 32 total - only eight did "right in the eyes of the LORD." The implication being, in the course of 400 years of the Israel-Judea monarchy, only eight were in good standing with God and with their assigned prophet.

This explains in large part why prophets were treated with such dishonor. The prophet's job was to call kings to repentance to keep in step with God's covenant faithfulness and blessing but the majority of kings would ignore the prophets' call.³ Many kings constructed temples and altars to other gods, made treaties with pagan nations, and fell into moral corruption, and where the king fails so do the people who follow him. The result was prophets were often unpopular and persecuted at the hands of the king and his kingdom.

Knowing this background, we see what's at stake with Nathan's rebuke to David. If David does not repent, Nathan could very well be treated like all the other prophets who will come after him.

¹ Pericope (from Greek περικοπή, "a cutting-out") is an extraction of text that forms one unit or thought, typically used in relation to Scripture

² "While Israel had many kings, they were not the ultimate authority in Israel. Rather, God's covenant word was the real authority. This is why God raised up the prophetic office to counterbalance the office of kingship. For every king, there was an opposing prophet or group of prophets ready to stick the covenant back in the king's face and call him to accountability to God's word. Thus, 1 and 2 Kings might more accurately be called "1 and 2 Kings vs. Prophets." The author pits each new king against a prophet(s) to help you see that God's prophetic word ultimately determines Israel's history. It's actually the prophets and the word spoken through them that drives the books." "Kings vs Prophets," *The Bible Project*. <https://thebibleproject.com/blog/kings-vs-prophets/>

³ Living in the secular West, many assume the role of the prophet was primarily fortune-telling but that was not the case. The prophet's primary role was a call to repentance. Many prophetic "future tellings" in Scripture were the consequences of what would happen if kings and the people did not repent. "The whole Word of God may in this general sense be spoken of as prophetic, inasmuch as it was written by men who received the revelation they communicated from God, no matter what its nature might be. The foretelling of future events was not a necessary but only an incidental part of the prophetic office. The great task assigned to the prophets whom God raised up among the people was 'to correct moral and religious abuses, to proclaim the great moral and religious truths which are connected with the character of God, and which lie at the foundation of his government.'" Easton, M. G. (1893). In *Easton's Bible Dictionary*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Nathan's rebuke is received favorably by David's grieving and ownership over his sin. We also see a fuller picture of David's repentance in Psalm 51. This Psalm reflects the culmination of his week of prayer and fasting that we see in 2 Samuel 12:16-17.

Looking at Psalm 51, one verse of particular theological note for the New Testament believer is v.11, "Remove not your Holy Spirit from me." Before modern readers attempt to apply this verse directly, one must consider the role of the Spirit in the Old Testament. Prior to the David and Nathan story, the Holy Spirit was seen in Saul's anointing in 1 Samuel 9-10. Only when Saul hit moral and spiritual failure did the Holy Spirit depart from him. We see this elsewhere in the Old Testament as well. The Holy Spirit's presence and power is over selected individuals to accomplish a specific task. In contrast, in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit's presence and power indwells His people to accomplish His kingdom purposes. Where the Spirit in the Old Testament was temporary, the Spirit in the New Testament is permanent.⁴

With that in mind, David's plea to God regarding the Holy Spirit is not meant to be viewed in salvific terms but in his kingly role. His heart posture wants to continue to be a man that God is willing to use to accomplish His purposes. He doesn't want the crown (or his legacy) to leave him the way it did Saul.

Personal Application

Like we saw earlier with Nathan, a prophet was someone who spoke directly to God and knew Him. Because of God's Spirit dwelling in us and God's Word directing us, we have the same ability to commune directly with God in a greater way than the prophets ever could. At the same time, sin is deceitful and blinding to everyone. Thus, we need to be modeling a life of regular communion with God to make known our sin. We also need to be regularly in the lives of others who also walk with God to make our sin known to us.

Furthermore, we see from Psalm 51's trajectory, David walks out of his time of prayer and fasting knowing that, while his sin is great, God's grace is greater. While his sin does have consequences and repercussions, they're ultimately forgiven at the hands of a merciful God. For those who follow Jesus, we know that all of our sins, no matter how great, are ultimately left at the foot of the Cross. Like David, we may experience earthly consequences for our actions but we have confidence that God has the final word over us, not our sin.

⁴ "Some have taken this to imply that the Holy Spirit can be taken from someone, at least in the OT; others have suggested that the Holy Spirit is viewed here in his role of empowering David for his kingly duties, and that this is a prayer that God not take the kingship and the divine anointing for kingship from David as he did from Saul (see note on 1 Sam. 16:14; cf. 1 Sam. 16:13). To evaluate these views, one should observe that the OT rarely discusses the Holy Spirit's role in cleansing the inner life (besides here, Ezek. 36:27 is the main OT text on the subject), and certainly does not enter into technical questions of the Spirit's permanent indwelling." *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 999–1001). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.