

Before I start, I would like to join with so many other people here in welcoming Amy back to Bebington. Many, many years ago, Amy led my Crusader Bible Class, and so it is a special pleasure to welcome her back. Of course, this sermon will give her a first chance to hear how well she taught me all those years ago.

Last week, we heard about the continuing war between the Israelites and the Ammonites in chapter 10, and the passage I have been asked to speak on today is chapter 12. So what happened in chapter 11? Without knowing about that, the speech from the prophet Nathan we have just heard doesn't make any sense.

It's springtime at the start of chapter 11, when kings send their men off to war. But King David stayed in Jerusalem, and while he was there, he saw a beautiful woman bathing. Following investigation, he found out that she was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Then he sent messengers to get her, she came to him and he slept with her.

Now, that might have been the end of the matter: but there was a hitch: she sent a message back to king: "I am pregnant."

So then David introduced "Plan B". If Uriah could be persuaded to sleep with his wife after he came back from battle, then there could be a cover-up. We could pretend that Uriah was the father and nobody would ever know the difference. But there was another hitch. Uriah wouldn't do it: "The Ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents and my master Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open fields. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as I live, I will not do such

a thing!”

So the next night David tried getting Uriah drunk, but even then he slept outside, so David moved on to another plan. His instructions to Joab, his chief of staff, are “Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him, so that he will be struck down and die.”

After the time of mourning was over, David had Bathsheba brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son.

So in chapter 11 we have one of Israel's great kings committing adultery and then committing murder. So it's not any surprise that the chapter ends with the words “But the thing David had done displeased the Lord”.

So at the beginning of chapter 12, Nathan is sent to King David and tells this little story about the rich man with the large flock and herd and the poor man with one little ewe lamb that he loved like a daughter. Yet when the rich man needed to serve a meal for a guest, he stole and killed the beloved lamb.

Before Nathan could finish the story, David had interrupted angrily and condemned the man. And Nathan said “You are the man! This is what the Lord says: I anointed you king over Israel, delivered you from the hand of Saul, gave your master's house to you, gave your master's wives into your arms, gave you the house of Israel and of Judah.

And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more.”

It is in these words that we catch the first clue of God's grace. Or maybe the grace is first evident in the fact that God sent a prophet at all to speak out to David.

“The Lord sent Nathan to David.” Those are the first words of our reading, and without them we would be in for a far bleaker story than the one we have. God will not let his servants remain comfortable in sin but will expose it. You might succeed in your unfaithfulness to God, but he will come after you. One of my favourite stories is that of the prophet Jonah, but there are so many examples throughout scripture of people who were unfaithful one way or another and yet were restored. Before Christ's death there was Peter; after Christ's resurrection there was Thomas. And there are other examples too of people who have been a very long way from the God they loved and who have been restored graciously to faith. I am not an adulterer or a murderer, but I can think back to dark times *after I came to faith* when the situation was very bleak. I am still very thankful for the gracious ministry and prayer of God's servants at those times, who helped me to come back to fellowship, stronger than before.

That is why I see God's grace so clearly in verse 8: as I said before it's very striking:

“And if all this had been too little I would have given you even more.”

The punishment for David's sin was death. He knew that. Nathan knew it too. And in verse 13 David said “I have sinned against the Lord.”

And Nathan said “The Lord has taken away your sin. You

are not going to die.” Now, is he getting off too easily? Is this a sign of Nathan's and God's weakness, or of their strength?

It's not just words that David has said: there is a real change and a real return in his character.

In a musical interlude, let's hear some verses from the beginning of Psalm 51.

- Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.
- Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
- For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me.

And elsewhere in this psalm, without any doubt a prayer of repentance, we also hear

- Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- O Lord open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

David was assured of forgiveness by Nathan's words: marvellous forgiveness: “The Lord has taken away your sin”. That's an assurance of forgiveness that sometimes we hear, but not often. It's important to know that we are forgiven, and that is why we say the confession and hear the absolution, but too often they are just words we say and hear.

So here we have a penitent and forgiven man standing before God, but even so it's not quite so straightforward as it might at first seem. There is the great trouble about the baby.

While the child was sick, David pleaded with God for the child's life. He fasted. He spent the nights lying on the ground. His cabinet tried to get him to get up and eat, but he wouldn't.

Then the boy died, and the ministers were huddled together whispering. Now, David might have been lots of things, but he wasn't that stupid, so he asked a straight question and they gave him a straight answer, even though they were worried he might do something desperate.

As it turned out, David got up, washed, changed, went to the house of the Lord to worship and then got his lunch sorted out once he got home.

His explanation as to why he had acted that way offers advice that is very practical both in earthly and spiritual terms. Once something has happened, even something undesirable, and there is nothing you can do about it, then it's time to move on to something where you can make a difference. This may be something related, but it may not be. We say "there's no use crying over spilt milk". That's often a right way of thinking, but I can understand it being hard, because I find it hard. I know that I need to move on from some things that happened a long time ago, but I'm not very good at it. I know it: it's a failing in many of us, and it's one of mine. Ask Viv. But King David, on this occasion, seemed to realise that he needed to look to the

future, not to the past. John F. Kennedy said “Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names.” This shows us that he didn't really understand forgiveness at all.

And King David and his wife Bathsheba did look to the future, and they had another son: they called him Solomon and God called him Jedidiah. The name “Solomon” means “peaceful” or “complete” or “prosperous”, while the name “Jedidiah” means “friend of God” or “beloved of God”.

Behind the scenes, the war with the Ammonites continues, and the royal citadel is captured. And he put on a crown weighing a talent of gold, which is just under six stone, and so would be quite a heavy thing to wear. And apparently that much gold is worth about £400,000 today.

But for David, it was worth more than that: it was another show of God's grace. But to finish, I want us to be sure what grace is: it is not just a nice fluffy feeling. It taught my heart to fear.