

## 9 David the Adulterer

David was, to say the least, an enthusiastic devotee of Yahweh, but he was no untarnished saint. He was superstitious, over-sensitive and weak, bloody and violent. He was guilty of lust, treachery and cowardice, and indeed the whole story of his reign, after his coming to full power, is overshadowed by his infamous sin of adultery and murder. The violence, rape, murder and rebellion that subsequently tore his family and broke his heart, are all consequences of that sin. David, like Saul, comes under the judgement of God, but tragic though the story is, the faith of David survives it, and survives it as something strong and deep, marking him out as Yahweh's man, and a fit king for Yahweh's people.

It became David's practice (a prudent one for the kingdom and the dynasty) to keep himself in the stronghold of Jerusalem and leave the fighting to his competent generals. It was a logical move, but one that had its dangers. One afternoon, from the rooftop of his palace, he caught sight of a woman bathing in her private garden. She was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, a Hittite warrior in David's army, which was away fighting at the time. She was beautiful and David wanted her, so he had her brought round to his house, where he seduced her. Shortly afterwards, she sent him word that she was pregnant.

Anxious to hide his guilt, David sent for Uriah, who returned to Jerusalem to make a report. But when the king suggested that he take a couple of days' leave at home with his wife, Uriah declined. He would not rest and enjoy himself while his comrades were still roughing it on the battlefield. Even when David got him drunk on the second night, he went off obstinately to camp in the palace guardroom.

David was now desperate. He had betrayed his own officer who was faithfully fighting his war, and now his clumsy attempt to hide the truth would only make his guilt the more obvious when Uriah returned to a pregnant wife. You can imagine the repercussions. The insult and treachery against one of his own men would be felt by all the army as a betrayal of their loyalty. David would be publicly shamed and there could easily be a mutiny. He knew men well enough to know that his throne and his life were in danger, and he lacked the courage to face it. He therefore sent instructions to Joab, commander of the army, to put Uriah in the front line, and then to withdraw the men suddenly, leaving him exposed. The scheme worked. To hide David's shame, Uriah was killed, twice betrayed by the master he had faithfully served.

We can only guess at the original reasons for David's adultery. Perhaps it was the greed of possession proving as strong in him as in any other. Or perhaps, retired from active fighting, in which he had been so successful, he felt frustrated and needed to reassert his virility, which he did in a thoroughly egoistic act. He grabbed. He asserted his possession of this desirable woman, disregarding every other claim of loyalty and commitment, as if he himself and his wants were paramount. After that, it was all a question of hiding his guilt, perhaps with the unconscious hope that if he escaped discovery, he would also escape his own conscience. It was the prophet Nathan who saw

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through his schemes and recognised the real problem. Nathan came to the king with a parable:

"In the same town were two men, one rich, the other poor. The rich man had flocks and herds in great numbers; the poor man had nothing but a ewe lamb, one only, a small one he had bought. This he fed, and it grew up with him and his children. It was like a daughter to him. One day, when a traveller came to stay with the rich man the rich man refused to kill one of his own flock to provide a meal. Instead, he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for his guest."

David's anger burst out against the man. "As Yahweh lives," he said, "the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay back fourfold for doing such a cruel thing."

"You are that man," Nathan said to David. (II Sam 12:1-7)

There is something touching about David's outburst - raging at the villain of a story as if he were real. This is the same passionate, sensitive, but not logical David who danced madly before the ark in Yahweh's triumph. In spite of his manly skill and courage, his political cunning and his charismatic appeal, he is, in his emotions, a big overgrown kid, living on impulse. If faith in Yahweh ever governed his emotions, it was by prompting the better impulse. Nathan knew how to reach his man; he hit him with a story that would rouse his better nature (not his more rational nature) and move him to pass sentence on himself. Impulsive like Samson, though less extravagant, he demands fourfold restitution, and is told, "You are that man."

The prophet then sets David's crime against the background of Yahweh's goodness to him, comparing David to the rich man.

"I anointed you king over Israel; I delivered you from the hands of Saul; I gave your master's house to you, his wives into your arms; I gave you the House of Israel and the House of Judah; and if this were not enough, I would add as much again for you. Why have you shown contempt for Yahweh, doing what displeases him? You have struck down Uriah with the sword, and taken his wife for your own; so now the sword will never be far from your House. I will stir up evil for you out of your own House. I will take your wives and give them to your neighbour."

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against Yahweh."

Then Nathan said to David, "Yahweh forgives your sin; you are not to die. But because you have shown contempt for Yahweh, the child that is born to you will die."  
(II Sam 12:7-14)

David, as we have seen before, knows his own limitations. Because he recognises that Yahweh is above him as his Master, he is able, king though he is, to accept the judgement passed on him. He does not deny, or threaten, or rail against the prophet, but recognises the word that comes to him from Yahweh, and bows to it.

In many ways, this story makes an approach to morality and the problem of guilt that is different from our own. To begin with, right and wrong are seen not as sorting out the conflicting claims of rival individuals, but as a matter of solidarity, as a logic of personal relationships on which every individual is deeply dependant for their own identity and reality. Those personal relationships were fundamental to Israel's survival and security, just as her whole existence depended from the start on her personal relationship with Yahweh. We have seen how the theme of family relationships - family, clan and national solidarity and reconciliation - runs through the Book of Judges; and how aggressive self-assertion cut through the bonds that held the people together. David, who had learnt his own dependence on Yahweh, also knew his dependence on his supporters. (His actions in Judah had shown this.) Without strong, loyal relationships, there is no strength, no freedom, nothing to live and plan for. Your strength for the present, your purpose for the future are bound up with your personal relationships, in family and community.

Uriah had shown himself sensitive to the demands of solidarity and personal commitment. While his comrades roughed it in the fields, there was no way he would take his ease at home. He made his bed, despite the king's urging, in the guard room. It wasn't a question of rules that restricted his own personal "freedom" to do as he pleased, but of his own freedom to commit himself, in solidarity, to his companions still on campaign. Such a morality, which recognises that your greatest strength, and therefore your greatest freedom, lies in your commitment to others, reflects the powerful solidarity between friends, between man and wife, master and servant, leader and follower, and comrades at war.

It is a far cry from the contradictions of a "permissive" society, whose highest aim is to allow individuals as far as possible to do as they please, idealising individual liberty. In such a society, we think of morality as a struggle between our "own" physical and psychological drives, and the opposing demands of society, expressed in some external, impersonal, restricting law. So even if I do right, the feeling remains that my real self has had to give in, that I have lost something of my individual freedom for the sake of conformity. Hence we imagine that the more we concede to the individual, the greater freedom and happiness we create. And yet we end up with a very negative morality. Devoid of obligations, it leaves us only restrictions. Don't hurt others; don't restrict others; don't interfere. What you actually do is your own private affair and not a moral question at all.

Permissiveness finds commitment a bind, and therefore it cannot really be positive about morality, for commitment is the positive dimension of morality; commitment to your husband or wife, your family, clan, community and nation, commitment to your God. About all such things permissiveness has to be negative, or at least "non-committal". It can condemn murder, which clearly puts an end to another's rights, but is far more reserved about adultery. But in David's view and his contemporaries', family ties, solidarity and commitment to the community strengthen and liberate people. There is no difficulty therefore in recognising both murder and adultery as wrong. Both of these are

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manifestations of that ego which destroys the bonds of solidarity, that narrow individualism typified by the rich man in Nathan's parable.

So there is no dallying with excuses for adultery, any more than for murder. David had breached the bonds of a marriage, and he had betrayed a weaker man, who had served him loyally and depended on him for protection. Compared with Yahweh's own generous treatment of himself, to which David owed all his prosperity, it was a vicious contradiction. Both the murder and the adultery would surely cry out for punishment, and until they have been punished, David must feel the contradiction burning in his very bones.

The whole story has proceeded by feeling and impulse rather than by reason, and in that respect it is unlike our more intellectual approach to ethical questions. Ideally, we try to grasp morality as a rational system, standing beyond feelings in its appeal to logic and reason. But Nathan's and David's morality is accessible above all to feeling, especially the deep, decisive feelings involved in a committed personal relationship. It is inseparable from the powerful feelings of solidarity: love, anger, protective jealousy. It comes naturally to those who understand the vital claims and rights of personal relationships. Uriah did not need a book of rules, or the king's permission, to tell him how to behave on leave - he just knew that there could be no leave for him while his comrades were still fighting.

David was not a philosopher, and logical reasoning would not have reached him. Nor did he have a spelt-out law, human or divine, for Nathan to quote at him. That, perhaps, is a weakness. But a moral system based on reason or law and not on appeal to the feelings, has, for all its advantages, the crippling disadvantage of not being able to move anyone. It may be recognised, but the motivation has to come from somewhere else. We whose morality is either law-based or reason-based have great problems moving ourselves or others to do what we admit to be right. But those who have learnt from experience that life and hope depend on trust and personal commitment to others, recognise right and wrong more reliably by their feeling, and where morality springs directly from involved feeling, the motivation is there as soon as the moral demand is recognised. David, when he sinned, was at war not just with something his head told him, but with his own truest feelings, and it was Nathan's strength that he knew how to invoke those feelings, through the parable: after that, he did not have to urge or argue.

But the most important point of all is that this story does not centre on morality as such but on the more basic question of guilt and judgement: how a person comes to terms with the dreadful truth that they have done wrong. Once we realise how important this question is, we part company with almost every system of ethics worked out in the history of Western civilisation, and are able to understand, at least in part, why European Christianity has so often failed to reflect the Bible's morality.

From before we were Christians, when the Greek philosophers and then the Roman law-makers set the basic framework for our systems of morality and law, we have expected

human behaviour to respond to reason, assuming that the first and most important point is to know what is really, or objectively, right or wrong. And even when we mistrusted reason and turned to the Bible for God's law, we expected to find that its clear statements of right and wrong would be able to correct our errors.

We failed to understand that the first question is not the moral one of discerning right from wrong, but the practical one of guilt: how to cope with the knowledge that we have done wrong. (Only the ancient Epicureans and the modern Existentialists among the pagans seem to have understood this. Only a Protestant insistence on the grace that frees from guilt, or the Catholic practice of sacramental confession seem to recognise it on the Christian side.) Whether we hope to follow reason in our judgement of moral issues, or to be unbiased and obedient in our reading of God's law, we cannot do so until we know how to cope with guilt.

For whatever holds logically or theologically, psychologically the first and most important question for morality is "How can I face my own failure to do right?" Until I can accept my own guilt, I will not accept any moral system or reasoning, or any interpretation of scripture, that puts me in the wrong. Logic and authority both must give way to the demands of self-protection, and my sincerest intentions of being guided by reason or by scripture are undermined by fear and the desperate urgency of keeping myself clear of blame. Moral judgement is distorted and moral discussion turned into defensive manoeuvres. Reason is suborned to fight off any serious threat, and "God's law" is interpreted with prejudice, because I cannot cope with the discovery that I am breaking it.

Not that I claim to be faultless - that would be so obviously false that I could not succeed in deceiving even myself. We all admit to faults. Few enjoy being so "good" that they are cut off from the ordinary crowd. But what I admit to are the faults that I expect people to be tolerant of, the little peccadillos that don't really matter. They serve to show that I'm ordinary and human, and to reassure me that I'm not putting on hypocritical airs when I claim to be as good "as the next person". "I know I'm no saint," I will tell you, "I have my faults, but..." and there follows my self-acquittal of any serious faults, any that I or my mates would really be ashamed of.

Moral uncertainty springs not from confusion about right and wrong, but from our inability to come to terms with guilt. Proposed new moralities and reasserted old ones, or attempts to expound convincingly God's word on the matter, fail because they do not touch the fundamental question: "How am I to come to terms with my own guilt?" They leave that question to psychology, which remains obstinately (and perhaps wisely) neutral on morality.

The oldest part of the Bible to deal with a "private", or individual, moral problem is a story above all about judgement. Israel's history leads us not directly into a code of laws or rational ethics, but into the experience of judgement. The story of David's sin is a story of judgement, concerned above all with that experience through which David comes to

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terms with his guilt. In it, Nathan is not forbidding adultery and murder (it's too late for that) nor telling him that his acts have been wrong (he already knows that). He is not telling him anything, but doing something: giving him, in Yahweh's name, a judgement through which he can come to terms with his guilt.

Until Nathan confronted him, David had been running away from guilt. His frantic efforts to cover up had also served to distract himself, but Nathan tricked him into stopping and looking guilt in the face, prompting him to pronounce judgement and then showing him that he was himself the accused. If you know or suspect that you have done wrong, you will fight to excuse yourself, to convince yourself that, somehow, you were not wrong, to hide your guilt from others, not least because you are afraid of facing it yourself. You can drain yourself of energy and drive yourself to illness in your efforts to escape, and not surprisingly, people often confess that it is, after all, a relief, when a long-suppressed or hidden guilt comes out. What Nathan gave David was release from the tensions of evasion and self-deception.

The passing of judgement is an act of mercy, freeing the tortured soul at last from doubt and hope, from pretence, deceit and dread of discovery. With judgement, authoritatively given and accepted as true, there comes release and relief, an end of inner conflict and outward blustering. There comes peace. So long as you think you can evade your guilt, you will torture yourself trying to do so, but the merciful love of Yahweh puts an end to all question of evasion, by declaring the truth and pronouncing judgement. After that, if you accept it, you can learn to live with yourself.

This, as I have said, is often acknowledged by those who have been found out after years of hiding their guilt. It is a fact exploited by the Chinese Communists in their purges, in the Cultural Revolution of Mao's later years. Those who were considered guilty were persuaded to make open confession and self-criticism. In its own way, I suspect, it became a relief to the badgered and harrassed prisoner to admit guilt and join his accusers against himself: better to believe yourself guilty and accept judgement than to struggle on alone, protesting your innocence against the sheer, authoritative weight of opinion. It is sometimes through a similar experience, I believe, that accused people in our own police stations may give in under pressure and sign confessions which they later want to repudiate.

But if the judgement is true, the release is true and permanent, and there is no need to brainwash or batter the accused into submission. The guilt which we fail to escape, in spite of our best efforts at denying, distracting, evading or excusing, is such a crushing weight upon us, that it is at last a blessed relief to have someone step in with undeniable authority, to declare the guilt and fix the punishment. True judgement, if it is accepted as such, is a liberating mercy: it provides a context within which we can face our guilt and expiate it. Nathan knew that when he spoke in Yahweh's name it was not to lesson David in moral behaviour, nor to fulminate or thrust punishment upon him, but calmly to declare the truth of Yahweh that puts an end to all deception, and the sentence that expiates guilt.

That sentence was not a penalty fixed arbitrarily by a powerful judge, nor even a price that God declared appropriate for the harm that had been done. It was, rather, the sentence that David himself passed on another: the "fourfold" restitution (payment in kind, but many times over) which David felt so deeply and instinctively to be right for the rich man in the parable. The price that he expects from another is the price that God's authority upholds in his own case.

Reconciliation, which the Book of Judges told us is a higher goal than revenge, can only take place against a background of fair, authoritative, and effective judgement, and this holds true for reconciliation with yourself. For those he loves, Yahweh steps in with firm judgement to end the harsh, unstable rule of guilt, and because its aim is to reconcile, its sentence is not a penalty arbitrarily imposed from outside, which would only add resentment against him, but the consistent application of a person's own judgement to themselves. Yahweh, who chose to rule Israel through a monarchy because that is the way they wanted to be ruled, now passes a sentence of "fourfold" retribution on David, because that is the judgement that he himself chose. It is not that God considers manifold retribution to be the best or fairest sentence - that's as may be - but he sees it is David's own judgement, and therefore the one he must submit to if he is to be reconciled - in harmony with himself. The "consistency" or integrity of Yahweh's judgement is not that he follows a law, but that he upholds in David's case the sentence that David passes on another. In other words, God is less concerned, immediately, about imposing his own moral standards on his people, than about bringing them to accept their own standards of judgement, upon themselves. He knows that only so can they come to terms with guilt and be free to learn more about moral behaviour.

Beyond judgement lies punishment. As Israel learned in her "dialogue" with Yahweh at the time of the Ammonite invasion, her relationship with him could only grow and deepen, after sin, by accepting him as the one behind her punishment.<sup>1</sup> It turns punishment from destructive and implacable consequences into a personal and loving treatment. Now, and for a long time to come, David is able to see in his sufferings the consequences of his sin, but consequences decreed and ruled by Yahweh, whose love he can trust. This deep conviction of his, his trusting faith, makes him something of an enigma to his court.

Soon after its birth, Bathsheba's child fell gravely ill and David pleaded with Yahweh, in actions that looked like self-punishment, to spare the child.

He kept a strict fast and spent the night on the ground, covered with sacking. His servants tried to get him to rise from the ground and take some food, but he refused. On the seventh day, the child died. David's servants were afraid to tell him. They thought that, as he had refused to listen to reason while the child was still alive, he would now do something desperate. David, however, noticed them whispering among themselves, and asked: "Is the child dead?" They answered: "He is dead."

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<sup>1</sup> See Ch. 4.

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David got up from the ground, bathed and anointed himself and put on fresh clothes. Then he went into Yahweh's sanctuary and prostrated himself. On returning to his house, he asked for food and ate it. His officers said, "Why are you acting like this? When the child was alive you fasted and wept: now the child is dead you get up and take food." "When the child was alive," he answered, "I fasted and wept, hoping that Yahweh would take pity on me and let him live. But now he is dead, why should I fast? I cannot bring him back again."

(II Sam 12:16-33)

David's belief is something deeper than the conventions of his time, which were perhaps closer to our own more superficial ideas. His servants did not follow his very personal understanding of punishment, and so were surprised and baffled by his apparently contradictory behaviour. But to David it made sense. In the logic of his relationship with Yahweh, his grief and penance were more than guilty reactions to the evil he had caused: they were part of a personal dialogue with Yahweh, the one who was really controlling his punishment. He could speak to him, communicate with him, plead with him, and even if his plea was refused, he was able to accept that it was a refusal, from Yahweh, and not some further consequence for which to make himself suffer.

Self-torture, for those who do not understand God, is a vicious circle of guilt. It is a self-centered complex, offering no escape into freedom, but only imprisonment in deeper guilt. We punish ourselves for our guilt, and then we are guilty of punishing ourselves. But David's sense of punishment, even when he afflicts himself, is focused not on himself but on Yahweh. His torture is part of his appeal to Yahweh, and when it does not succeed (self-torture seldom does succeed in swaying God) he calmly accepts that that is an end of the matter. Yahweh's refusal does not destroy his trust, and he is able to return to his normal life. Yahweh has shown his will, and because that is final, David can now be at peace.

It is a peace that eludes many in our guilt-ridden society. We pretend to "de-mythologise" guilt, to explain it all by the insights of psychology. We recognise its harmful effects and devious workings and believe we can banish it from our personality and our relationships. Between those who no longer believe in God or in his power to punish, and those who so contrast love and judgement that a loving God can't ever judge, there ought to be no guilt, no painful consciences, no tortured evasion to mar the lives of twentieth-century sophisticates.

But guilt is as real, or more real, than ever. We have abandoned the idea of a punishing God only to take up the cudgels against ourselves. When we deny God's role in punishment, we put ourselves back into the hands of guilt itself. Escape, concealment and self-punishment are crazily mixed up in a mess of activity that is no longer liberating. We bury ourselves in pious practices or hard work, in devoted service or the distractions of noise and pleasure, each according to our character. We transfer our punishment to

others by forcing them to work as hard, or drink as hard, or laugh as hard as we do. We damage our hearts, our stomachs, our lungs, our backs, driving ourselves incessantly because, deep down, we hate ourselves. And because we will not see and trust the hand of God in our punishment, we have no way to appeal for mercy. We cannot ask our own suppressed consciences for forgiveness, for they are but the mouthpiece of our guilt, and guilt will never take away guilt.

We torture ourselves, and when we are worn out by our beatings, our only refuge is sedatives or the television, apathy, depression or despair. We would do better to admit our failure and let the story of David show us, if it can, a better and more positive meaning in punishment.

We might not accept all David's understanding of punishment. We might not be able to imagine that God would decree the death of a baby to punish the father's sin. (Not that babies don't die for their fathers' sins - they often do, and for the sins of many who are no relation of theirs. It's just that we have shifted that problem from the concept of "punishment" to the more general and impersonal one of "evil".) But David had learnt something about punishment that was difficult for his contemporaries, and extremely difficult for us to grasp: that if you know and trust the one who is punishing you, you do not need to go on punishing yourself - overtly or covertly. You are free from guilt, because God's punishment is part of his liberating love.

I would not deny that David's idea of punishment is inadequate. It is only the beginning of the matter and not by any means the end of it. But it is a deeper, more advanced understanding than we often reach, for he had insight into an area where we are confused by our hang-ups and prejudices. I hope we will go beyond David in our relationship with the God who punishes, but first we must learn to catch him up.

David's sin gave rise to a train of punishments, consequences beyond his control that spanned the rest of his reign and extended to future generations. As he used violence to rid himself of Uriah (and so to protect his throne and dynasty) descendants of his would, again and again in history, meet violent deaths. As he had taken Uriah's wife, his own wives would be taken from him, and, to his shame, publicly bedded by another. As he had breached and destroyed the family of his servant, he would have trouble and rebellion from his own family, to destroy his contentment.

It is not what we would call "just" punishment - but it is natural and realistic. His family owed their position, their status and wealth to him. It was his charisma, his skill and patience, his long years of waiting and working for the throne, and his reliance on Yahweh that paid off in the kingship over all Israel, and a reputation that ensured the people's lasting respect for his descendants. As they shared in his triumphs, they were inevitably drawn into the consequences of his sin.

It is neither more nor less than we observe all around us every day. Children and descendants do pay for their fathers' and their mothers' mistakes, for all evil is like

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David's adultery: its consequences reach and involve many more people than we could have foreseen. (This does not excuse us, but increases our guilt, since we should know that every wrong deed may be far more wrong and harmful than we realise.) Kings and parliaments may seek to impose some kind of justice, but in mere nature there is no justice, only blind, unforeseen consequences.

Yet they are consequences. The effects of evil are not like a fine, a penalty fixed arbitrarily for certain infringements. With hindsight (which of course always comes too late) you can see the connection between the original evil or sin and its "punishing" consequences, even if, to our sense of justice, these are out of proportion to the offence. Evil is not fair, but it does have its own logic.

The stories of Yahweh's "punishment" try to show that he, as ruler of his people, is in charge of these consequences - without trying to make them appear any more fair than they really are. It is not a question of idealising punishment, but of facing consequences and asserting that these come from the hand of Yahweh. When sin finds its consequences, they are Yahweh's punishment. If not, then they are a doom we cannot escape. If only impersonal cause and effect regulates our punishment, then we are trapped in it, and cannot appeal, but when God rules it as his own act, we are set free.

The instrument of David's punishment and the cause of his most bitter sorrow, was his son Absalom.<sup>1</sup> He was David's favourite, a handsome young man of engaging personality, able to charm both friend and foe alike and win them over to his will. He was ambitious, and ruthless, and managed to find great favour at his father's court, even after he had once been exiled for murdering his brother in a family quarrel. He was able to set himself up, with a good deal of show, as a promising young prince and went about making himself known and liked among the Israelites who came to Jerusalem to settle their complaints. He built up his image as a man of the people, one in touch with their needs, who understood their grievances in a way that David, shut up in the court, could not. He made it generally known that if only he, Absalom, had control, every dissatisfied Israelite would have his claims recognised.

When the time was right, he persuaded his father to let him go to Hebron, to worship Yahweh there in fulfilment of a vow. As the ancient centre of Judah, and the place where David himself had been anointed, it was the right place to begin a rebellion. He had himself declared king there, and messengers raised his supporters among the northern tribes. There must have been a lot of dissatisfaction among David's subjects, but the king was taken completely by surprise. He was not prepared for a seige in Jerusalem, and, with Absalom's supporters to the north and the south, ready to close in, he had to abandon the city and trust once again to the running, hiding tactics of his youth.

It was a sad day for the city and for David's loyal court, when the king who had made Israel safe had to flee for his life. King and city both had probably been too isolated from

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<sup>1</sup> II Sam 13-19

the real feelings of the Israelite tribes, and now they were paying the penalty. For David, this betrayal by the son he loved and had once before forgiven, repeated his own act of betrayal, and was, in Yahweh's hands, part of its promised punishment.

As he prepared to leave, the priest Zadok and Levites carrying the ark of Yahweh came to the wadi Kidron where he was mustering his followers. It was an offer of support. If Absalom should take the city, he would have every show of being in control, acclaimed in Hebron and supported by so many from all the tribes. To have the ark would give David a powerful counter-claim, a sign of Yahweh's support. It might restore his battered image as a rallying point for Israel, and its presence, as a symbol of Yahweh's blessing, would boost the morale of his forces.

But once again, David's faith was deeper and more personal, more realistic, than that of his contemporaries. He knew that Yahweh's support was not his to command, that he could not, by carrying the ark away, manipulate God, however powerfully it appealed to the minds of his people.

The king said to Zadok, "Take the ark of God back into the city. Should I win the favour of Yahweh, he will bring me back and permit me to see it and its dwelling place again. But should he reject me, then here I am, let him deal with me as he likes."  
(II Sam 15:25-26)

(Not that David didn't have other motives - he wanted a reliable spy left behind in Jerusalem, and the priest Zadok was just the man. David is a complex person, but, as we have seen before, if he was able to think clearly and act in his own best interests, it was his realistic and convinced faith in Yahweh that cleared his head and saved him from blustering his way to disaster as Saul and many others did.)

David's trust in Yahweh remained, even when he recognised that Yahweh's hand was upon him to punish him. It was a deeper, more mature faith than the confidence of his youth: accepting that he was Yahweh's man, and could not be anything other than dependent on him, whether or not Yahweh assured him of victory. He had been guilty of betrayal and had been forgiven. He knew now that there was more to their relationship than a simple guarantee of success.

We have seen that, without God, punishment degenerates into self-punishment, or blind consequences to be accepted fatalistically. The only way out of guilt is to recognise that God has control of our punishment, but there is a sickness in us which has taken away all our confidence in the love of those who punish. We can only see domineering, self-defensive ego, sadism, the rage of repressed guilt, or cold vindictiveness masquerading as concern or love. Many who believe in a punishing God cringe before him as before a carping, vindictive power. He is not someone they know and trust, but a deification of their own sick conscience, a nightmare of insatiable guilt endowed with omnipotence and devoid of all pity or restraint. Those who merely believe that God is punishing them, are a long way from those who trust God who is punishing them. They may believe in his

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existence and power, in the moral law, and in a great many facts from the Bible, but they do not trust God. They cannot love him and can only fear him.

Their nightmares have led many to deny that God punishes, and to speak of a God of love as if he were the very opposite of a punishing God. These forget that the nearest opposite to love is not punishment but indifference, and a God who does not punish does not care. An indifferent or helpless God has no real part to play in our experience of evil, guilt and punishment, which then becomes the province of demons. Once we separate punishment from God, we open the door to unquenchable guilt. Unbelief is as deadly as belief without trust.

David's God is one who can be trusted to punish wisely and lovingly, who is involved and offers us a way out of evil. If, like David, we trust and love God, then he himself becomes our release from guilt, giving us peace with ourselves and reconciling us according to the judgements we make on others. The punishment that he decrees and upholds is the work of his love, which will not have us tortured and at war in our own hearts.

But to accept punishment is not to revel in our own suffering. That is a perversion of guilt which David does not teach us. He took no delight in mortification but healthily avoided pain. He prayed to be spared. In suffering, he felt utterly helpless, like the hero of a Greek tragedy, but unlike the pagan hero, he was helpless in the hands of one whom he trusted. His punishment was deep anguish to him even though his trust saved him.

Absalom's rebellion fell apart in the end, giving David a victory that broke his heart. The young man lacked the staying power and resourcefulness of his father. Although he established himself in Jerusalem and bedded a number of his father's wives as a public demonstration of his ascendancy, time was against him. When David had had time to recover and muster his own supporters - of much longer standing - Absalom was overthrown and killed. It was perhaps the most unhappy day of David's life, and his generals were humiliated to find him mourning his rebel son, instead of celebrating their success.

The king shuddered. He went up to the room over the gate and burst into tears, crying, "My son Absalom! My son! My son Absalom! Would I had died in your place! Absalom, my son, my son!" Word was brought to Joab that the king was mourning for Absalom, and the day's victory was turned into mourning for all the troops. They returned stealthily that day to the town, as troops creep back ashamed when routed in battle.

Then Joab went indoors to the king. "Today," he said, "you are shaming all your servants who have saved your life, because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you. You have made it plain that if Absalom were alive today and we all dead, you would be pleased. Now get up, come out and reassure your soldiers, or not one man will stay with you tonight." (II Sam 19:1-8)

The story of David's sin and its punishment is not an answer to the problem of guilt. It is the beginning of an answer, in which Yahweh shows himself the lord and regulator of punishment, not out of cruelty, but out of that mercy which David had learnt to trust. In his dealings with David, God shows us again that trust, or faith, is the most important element in our relationship with him, and here it is a trust that survives even the conviction of God's displeasure. It is through such faith that David remained Yahweh's servant, ruling Israel in God's name in spite of his sins.