

Cleansing...

There is a very interesting backstory to Psalm 51. King David, a very powerful man, who is credited with writing many of the 150 psalms which are included in the Bible, is at the heart of this psalm.

David wasn't always powerful. He was born the youngest of his father Jesse's sons. He was a redhead, the runt of the litter and considered a bit of a daydreamer. He preferred spending time with his sheep in the field, playing his lute, then anything else. He was said to have a clean heart.

Samuel, a prophet chosen by God, is tasked with finding a rightful king to replace Saul who has stopped listening to God. Samuel is told to visit Jesse who has a son who will be the rightful king. Samuel will know which of the sons is the chosen one when God tells him. SO, Samuel travels to see Jesse and Jesse trots out 7 of his 8 sons. The sons are tall, strong, handsome and stately. They are everything that David is not.

Beginning with Eliab, Samuel goes from son to son, each one being rejected in turn by God. God feels that none of these men have the right heart for faithfulness and obedience to God. Samuel asks if there is another son. Jesse replies that he has another son, David. I'm giving you a recap of this story, if you want the full story, please check out 1 Samuel 16 and 17.

Samuel examines David, sees that he is ruddy and has beautiful eyes. God finds favour with David and he is anointed with a horn of oil right there and then. The spirit of God entered David and he was the anointed from that day on. Eventually he came into the service of King Saul and his lute playing, which saved Saul from nightmares, brought him into the King's favour.

Fast forward to David's epic battle with Goliath which saved the kingdom.

Then to his lifelong friendship with Jonathan over which there has been much speculation through the years.

Then to Saul's desire to kill David, David's escape and subsequent anointing as King.

One night King David is sitting on his throne, watching over his kingdom and he sees Bathsheba bathing herself. No, it's not likely she was bathing on her roof. She would have been participating in some kind of mikvah, a ritual cleansing after she had finished her monthly menses. A woman, when bleeding, was considered unclean and would not be allowed to be in the company of any man during this time. David was, for all intents and purposes a "Peeping Tom", er, David.

He saw her, when she was in a very vulnerable position, was overwhelmed with her beauty and wanted her as his own. It didn't matter that David already had a harem of wives, he wanted Bathsheba. So she was brought to his palace and, in scripture, it's worded as though the event was consensual. Except it wasn't.

Imagine Bathsheba...she is performing a ritual cleansing in order to purify herself from her uncleanliness. She finishes the ritual, is getting ready for bed and the King's guards arrive at her house and take her to the King. Bathsheba is a married woman and her husband Uriah is a soldier.

She is not given the opportunity to refuse. She is taken to the King, where she is raped then returned to her home. Shortly thereafter she finds that she is pregnant and her husband is still at battle. She tells this to King David who arranges for Uriah to come home for some leave from battle, hoping he will be intimate with Bathsheba and David's crime will be covered up. Except that Uriah was a faithful soldier and refused to lay with this wife. So David arranged for Uriah to be sent back to battle, to the front lines, where he was killed. David arranged for Uriah's death.

After Uriah is killed, Bathsheba is sent for once again and she comes to live with King David and his harem of wives, where he is said to "comfort her". She continues to live in David's house with his other wives as her pregnancy progresses.

The prophet Nathan comes to see King David and tells him a parable of a rich man with many sheep who killed a poor man's only sheep. The king is outraged at the audacity of the wealthy man in the parable. Nathan tells David that he IS that man, taking Uriah's wife, raping her, and killing Uriah to cover his sin.

I'm paraphrasing here. Nathan tells David that his house will be cursed because of his sin and wrongdoing and the child that Bathsheba is carrying will die. Nathan tells David that the wrongs he did were by cover of night, they happened in the dark; yet David's downfall and the havoc that is about to happen will occur by day, in the light, so they may be witnessed by everyone in David's kingdom.

Bathsheba gives birth to a child, who is not named. And it is telling to read how Bathsheba is referred to...from 2 Samuel, "The Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became very ill. David therefore pleaded with God for the child; David fasted, and went in and lay all night on the ground." (2 Samuel 12.15, NRSV) Six days later the child, unnamed, died.

David is shaken to his core. Bathsheba goes into mourning. David knows what he has done. And he seeks to make amends. Part of which is the writing of Psalm 51.

Have mercy on me, O God,  
 according to your steadfast love;  
 according to your abundant mercy  
 blot out my transgressions.  
 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
 and cleanse me from my sin.

Psalm 51.1-2, NRSV

You may recognize part of this psalm from the traditional Ash Wednesday liturgy from the Book of Alternative Services. This psalm was written that David may be cleansed from his sin and begin again. When we are baptised, water is poured out over us. Anglican and United Churches use a sprinkling method or water poured by the handful. Some traditions use full immersion.

Baptism is referred to as a spiritual cleansing. An erasing of previous sins, wiping the slate clean and starting over again. It is meant to bring us into right relationship with God, and this is why, in the early days of baptism, people would wait until they were close to death to be baptised, in order that their soul would be the purest, just prior to their death, to ensure entry to heaven.

David writes Psalm 51 as a way to make atonement to God for his terrible sins. He knows his child with Bathsheba has died because of his horrible behaviour.

For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgement.

Psalm 51.3-5, NRSV

And so David promises to make things right. He is asking for another chance. He is begging, on his knees, to be returned to God's favour.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Psalm 51.10-12, NRSV

And so, David is returned to a better relationship with God. David is forgiven, yet his sins are not forgotten. He and Bathsheba go on to have four more children, all sons. Solomon, their youngest, becomes the rightful king after David's death.

The house of David is plagued with all kinds of horrific events. Your homework is to read first and second Samuel. It tells the entire sordid tale. Ask yourself if the writing captures the atrocity of what actually happened to Bathsheba and Uriah. Bathsheba continues to live with the man who raped her and has four other children with him. Yet her story doesn't end there.

When David is on his deathbed Bathsheba reminds him that he pledged the rightful heir and King would be their youngest son Solomon. She stands up to him and reminds him of his promise. And he respects her and thus keeps that promise.

David was anointed and blessed as God's anointed. His house was thus also blessed. Yet his sin was egregious and even after he made amends, his sins may have been forgiven, yet were not forgotten.

From Jesse, through David to Solomon and through a total of 43 generations, we get to Jesus. A man, born of God and of Woman. Fully divine and fully human. Born into a house both blessed and cursed.

Two of the best known Canadian artists are responsible for a song, written to tell part of the story of David, with great poetic licence. This story was written by the late Leonard Cohen, a Jewish poet and songwriter. It is most memorably sung by k.d. lang, a practising Buddhist, who often performs barefoot. The song is about David, it is also about Samson and Delilah. It is about life, it is also about death. Here are two verses of Hallelujah.

Now I've heard there was a secret chord  
That David played, and it pleased the Lord  
But you don't really care for music, do you?  
It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth  
The minor falls, the major lifts  
The baffled king composing Hallelujah

Now I've done my best, it wasn't much  
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch  
I've told the truth, I didn't come here just to fool you  
And even though it all went wrong  
I'll stand before the Lord of song  
With nothing, nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah

Leonard Cohen, "Hallelujah"

Amen.

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Psalm 51.1-12