

2 Samuel 11

Hallelujah?

Sinning and then growing through God's forgiveness

Hallelujah! This is a word that all people seem to know. It is a Hebrew word on loan to the English language for all kinds of purposes. It began as a word used in worship, but one can hear it spoken in response to someone getting something right, or done, or finally understanding something. When someone is satisfied with a result you might hear, "well hallelujah."

The word "Hallelujah" is actually two Hebrew words put together: "Hallelu" and "Yah". The first word Hallelu means to praise someone or something, but that praise happens with a group and is translated as "Praise ye" as in the plural "ya'll praise." "Yah" is the English transliteration of the covenant name of Israel's God or Lord. When you read the words "Praise the Lord!" in scripture it is likely a translation of the word Hallelujah.

In our hymn singing Hallelujah is used frequently, particularly in the Easter and Christmas hymns. Think of Jesus Christ is risen today. Each line closes with the word hallelujah! Then of course there is Handel's Messiah with the iconic Hallelujah Chorus that is so powerful and recognizable that it invokes all kinds of memory and emotion in people. (Sing a phrase)

In pop culture there is also an iconic song by Leonard Cohen that is immediately recognized by anyone who has listened to a radio – Hallelujah.

Most of us can sing the first few lines, "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...", and if you get that far you likely start humming after that and join in again at the words Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

This song has made its way into the church and will today as well, but it is not really a Christian song. It is more of a secular hymn to the brokenness we experience in life, but shares that life is still something to be valued.

Part of the reason people have felt this was a song of faith is the Biblical references to the story of David and Bathsheba and Samson and Delilah. And Cohen who grew up Jewish was well versed in the scriptures of the Old Testament. But this particular song was not meant as an ode to God, but rather speaks more to the secular experience of the world than the sacred. Many people have tried to pin down the lyrics and make them mean one thing or another, but it is more likely that Cohen really meant for the words to be open to one's own interpretation in a way that brings meaning to the individual.

But his choice of Biblical references is interesting. Today we look at just one, the story of David and Bathsheba. This story is told at the pinnacle of David's power as Israel's king. He has everything he wants and more, he is not even going into battle with his soldiers anymore, as it seems all things are in hand. But power can be a precarious and dangerous thing. The wisest people are very careful when they hold power over others as the powerful can also be brought low.

One need only think of what is going on with Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg right now, or how the story of porn star seems to be messing with the U.S. president's life to know how vulnerable people in power can be both to thinking that they are untouchable and to making decisions that can blow them out of the water.

King David forgot about his humanness. He began to see himself as larger than life, that whatever he wanted he could have just because he had the power to get it. And one evening when he was lounging around, his soldiers battling it out in a distant place, David lays his eyes upon the beautiful Bathsheba.

When David inquires as to who this woman is he is given all the information he needs to make a wise decision. He is told, "She is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." She is not just an object, she is someone's daughter and another man's wife. Doesn't seem to have stopped David in his tracks at all. He sends for her, gets intimate, and the only words she is given to speak are the ones that tell David that she is pregnant.

Those words spell the beginning of the end for David. He doesn't realize it yet. He will be busy over the course of the next while scheming ways to get himself out of the mess. He moves from adultery, to manipulation, and ultimately to murder, not at his hand, but at his word. But David the most blessed and celebrated King of Israel will suffer the consequences of sin.

In this passage we hear nothing of God. It is not until the next part of the story when Nathan, David's friend comes to him and condemns David, that we hear about God's reaction and judgement that will lead to the death of the child born to David and Bathsheba in their adulterous action. The sin of the king will have repercussions not only for David himself, for Bathsheba, Uriah, and David's children, but it will affect the entire nation of Israel over the long run.

What started out as desire that could have been averted if David had understood vulnerability and his position as a child of God, prone to sin and temptation, became a devastating course in the life of man and nation. David had always had a heart for God, it was what God loved about David, but in that moment pride, power, prestige all played into the drama.

In stark contrast we have Uriah, the husband and soldier who has little power in the grand scheme of things and even with all the manipulation of David, will not trade his honour as a soldier to lay with his wife when he is given a little time for R&R. We have

no idea if he has clued into David's scheming. We are not given that information, but we do know that he carries his own death sentence back onto the battle field as David has written Joab the commander and made certain of Uriah's demise and death.

Four characters...David who carries all the power as ruler of the kingdom and up until now the favour of God. Bathsheba, who commits adultery with David, but it is difficult to judge her actions. She is living at a time when men have all the power whether her father, her husband, or the king. She may not have felt she had any choice. Uriah, a man of honour and conscience. And Joab, who just follows orders, again, hard to say how much pressure he felt to obey David's command, but throughout the story of David, Joab seems to be his go-to guy. Joab will do what is necessary to protect king and country.

At times it is easy to look at characters in the biblical narratives and think that it was another time and place and has little to say to our lived experience. But if we really put ourselves into the story, there are likely things that we can relate to in each of the characters.

We may not have the power of a ruler of a country, but we hold power over someone. You may be the matriarch of the family or the father figure, you may be a teacher or boss, or the one who handles the money. And just by virtue of being people living in Canada we have more power than the refugees coming out of war-torn countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, or Myanmar. We hold the power to help others or ignore their cries for help.

Just as we can and do hold power, at times we are like Bathsheba. We may have felt like pawns in someone else's game. That nothing we say or do makes a difference, no one is listening anyway. We are forgotten, moved about, and given little account. Our words seem to fall on deaf ears. Our fears ignored.

We have also all been like Uriah. People of honour trying to do our best to be the people God has called us to be. To do what is expected of us in our families, with friends, and in the church. We see the manipulation, experience it, but steer clear of the controversies, the gossip, and continue to strive to be the best people we know how to be.

Still other times we are the ones who carry out the orders of others. We are the people who get the job done and with blinders forget or ignore that others are being affected to some degree by the decisions we or others make. We say to ourselves, this is best, it is the only option, rather than consider if what we are doing is God's will.

And that is the question. Where was God in all of this? Where is God in all of this? In the messes we bring upon ourselves or upon others. It is also in part what separates the Old Testament from the New Testament. In the Old Testament God is often portrayed as silent or judgemental. One must understand the covenants of God with the people of Israel to understand that God was always present, always with his people, always there

desiring that they would love God and turn from their sinful ways to be the people of God.

The New Testament and the revelation of Jesus Christ through his life, death, and resurrection, has made God more accessible both in understanding and in lived experience. God is always with us. Through Jesus we can claim the forgiveness extended to every believer even when we have royally screwed up. This is the Christmas and the Easter message. God is with us just as God has always been. Through Jesus we see God's love, compassion, and care for us – always.

We are human, just as the characters in the story of David and Bathsheba were real and human. But the final word for us is not death, it is life. Forgiveness doesn't mean that we are relieved of the consequences of our actions, but forgiveness does mean that we can move on from that to become more and more the people that God calls us to be.

In our brokenness and in our wholeness, we can sing Hallelujah!