

The Parable of the Ewe Lamb

by the Rev. James P. Cooper

“As the Lord lives, the man who has done this shall surely die!” (2 Samuel 12:5).

David was the greatest of the kings of Israel. It was David who alone could unite the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It was David who had the strength and the military knowledge to capture the mighty city of the Jebusites and make it his capital, which he then named “Jerusalem,” meaning “possession of peace.” David was known as an able leader, a military genius, a man of great religious passion, and a wise judge over his people. When David was performing his office as king of a united Israel, he, more than any other king in the whole Word, represented the royalty and power of God.

On the other hand, David the man was capable of great passion, great cunning, and great cruelty. No other character in the Word shows the contrast between a man and his office so powerfully as David. David first saw Bathsheba while he was walking on the roof of his palace, and he saw her bathing on the roof of a neighboring building. Abusing his kingly powers, he commanded that she be brought to him. Later, when David discovered Bathsheba’s pregnancy, he first ordered her husband Uriah home from the battle so he could spend the night at home with her and so believe the child to be his own. But when Uriah refused to spend the night in comfort with his wife while his men and officers were still in battle, David gave orders to put this valiant and loyal leader into the hottest part of the battle, and he ordered the other men to then withdraw from him, leaving him to his death. Ironically, Uriah’s sense of honor and respect for his comrades-at-arms was what made it necessary for David to kill him, and even worse, Uriah’s bravery and skill as a warrior were turned against him and used to destroy him. It was this deliberate deception and the use of Uriah’s own honor and virtue to destroy him that sets this crime apart.

David as king represented the Lord. In this story David committed terrible sins, so we can know that David the man does not represent the Lord, but instead what is opposite to the Lord. Here he represents a love of self so powerful that it can convince itself that it is above civil, moral, and spiritual law, and so full of desire to rule over others that it wants to overthrow the Lord Himself and rule in His place. The love of self is seldom so fully developed in people still in the world, but with a little careful and honest self-examination, we all can recognize some degree of this love of self in ourselves.

Everyone comes into selfish states from time to time. The Lord knows this, for He knows our nature. The question is, how does the Lord provide for us to find our way out of these selfish states? How can order and equilibrium be restored to our lives without also destroying our spiritual freedom?

We can see how the Lord gently leads even our most hateful and destructive states in the way that Nathan the prophet brought David back into order. He does not accuse David. He does not threaten him. Nathan simply presented truth to David, and then let him judge himself in comparison to the truth. And so the Lord provides for our states. He has given us the Word in such a form that it does not intrude into our lives. The books lie passively on the shelf until we

ourselves pick them up and open them, and even then, unless we read with a genuine desire to learn from the Lord, the Divine within them will be invisible. The Lord never forces Himself into our lives unbidden. We must invite Him in.

Also like the Word, Nathan spoke to David in a parable, a story that contained many hidden levels of meaning, but that did not accuse David of any crime or challenge his authority as a king in any way. The whole of the Word is written in parables, and the Lord Himself says that while in the world, He did not teach except in parables. A parable is a passive way of making a point; that is, the point will not be seen at all unless it is looked for.

Nathan told the story of a rich man who stole the ewe lamb of his poor neighbor so that he could have a nice dinner for a guest. The story was told so that obviously it was not just any lamb, but a family pet as well. The parable was carefully crafted to stir our sympathy for the poor man and his family, and inflame our anger for the cold-hearted rich man who could murder and eat a lamb that was practically a member of the family!

The doctrines tell us that the rich represent those who have many truths and goods from the Lord through the church but who do not put them to any use in their life. They disregard the things of the church. In comparison, the poor are those who, due to circumstances, do not have any good or truth, but still they long for them and wish to have them from the Lord. Those few truths that they do have they love and cherish and bring into their lives.

The image of the little ewe lamb contains many powerful ideas think about the opposite of selfishness, that is, complete and utter trust in the Lord and a willingness to follow Him. While all lambs represent innocence (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3994:3), a ewe lamb in particular represents the holiness of innocence (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2720:6). More images were given to illustrate that we are to think about this lamb in terms of our ideal relationship with the Lord. The lamb was like the man's own daughter, and a daughter represents good. It ate his food, which represents that he gave it spiritual nourishment, that is, he gave it the things that it needed for spiritual life and growth. It drank from his own cup, that is, he gave the inmost truths that it needed. It lay in his bosom, which means it was conjoined to him by love and mercy. These images tell us that if we are willing to follow what the Lord teaches in the Word, He will nourish us with spiritual food, He will quench our thirst for spiritual truth, and eventually we will be conjoined with him to eternity in the life of heaven.

On the other hand, there is the symbol of the rich man, the man who has acquired many goods and truths in his lifetime but has hidden them away, as it were, and does not live according to them. Such a man will be condemned when his crimes are discovered, that is, he will go to hell.

It is interesting to note that there is an additional penalty upon this rich man: he will be required to restore the lamb fourfold because he had no pity. How could this add to his punishment when he has already been condemned to death? No one could replace such a loss, and what would four lambs be to a rich man? The only reason that this additional punishment is mentioned is for the sake of the internal sense, for it tells us something further about our own states. The lamb was to be restored fourfold because the man had no pity. On the other hand, the Lord has compassion for everyone, and He teaches that anyone who does not also have compassion for others cannot

be conjoined with Him, for all conjunction is of love. You cannot be conjoined to someone if your loves are totally different (see *Arcana Coelestia* 904:2). It is also true that those people who have been gifted with a sense of perception know that whenever they feel compassion toward another, they are urged by the Lord and by their conscience to render aid. In this we are reminded of the parable of the Good Samaritan (see *Arcana Coelestia* 6737).

Another aspect of evil that is brought out by this parable is how the sinner so often commits his evils so that they are obvious to many, yet he can convince himself that they are not known to others. It seems that in his own mind David actually believed that he could take Bathsheba from Uriah, have her become pregnant while Uriah was away at battle, and then order his soldiers to abandon Uriah so he would die in battle without anyone noticing this chain of events. How often does it happen that we do things we think are secret when yet they are well known to our friends and family (who, out of friendship or embarrassment, have simply decided not to mention them)? It's likely that we have all known people who have practiced a vice in what they believed to be secret when actually it was obvious to everyone what they were doing. This shows how powerful self-deception and self-justification can be.

David believed that he could hide his adultery by committing murder, but his foolishness and sinfulness were painfully obvious to all. It is true that some evils can be kept secret in the world, but in the spiritual world, when as spirits enter the second state—the state of their interiors—they no longer care what others think, and their behavior becomes one with their interior loves. In this way all spirits can see their evils, and those who are good can reject them. Eventually all sins, whether done in secret or openly, will be made known. We read, “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment” (Mathew 12:36). The Lord also said, “For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops” (Luke 12:2,3).

We often find ourselves in a position like that in which Nathan the prophet found himself. We don't know whether David and Nathan were friends, but Nathan was the chief prophet of the Lord, and so he would have a position of some respect in David's court. He was no doubt free to come and go, and was frequently present to give counsel on important decisions. Also, in his office as a priest, Nathan was under a moral obligation to act as a watchman and condemn David for his open sin and call him to repentance. But, as a man, Nathan was afraid. David had already killed one important and powerful counselor because of his infatuation with Bathsheba. Was there not good reason to fear that David might even kill the Lord's prophet under these circumstances?

Do we not also find ourselves in a similar situation from time to time where we see a friend or loved one traveling on a course which is clearly headed for disaster? We feel conflicting emotions. On the one hand, we want to say something to make our friend stop doing what we know to be evil or foolish. On the other hand, we are reluctant to say anything that our friend will regard as critical because he or she may then be angry with us and say hurtful things. This puts us in a very unhappy state as we try to decide between two difficult paths. Our conscience will not allow us to let the evil go on, and our natural affection for our friend does not wish to say anything that might cause pain.

When we find ourselves in these circumstances, it could be helpful to follow Nathan's example. As a priest, he had to condemn David's sins. As a man, he feared for his own life. So he found a middle ground; he used the parable of the lamb to cause David to judge himself. The important principle that is illustrated here is that it is the *truth* that judges people, not other people. When Nathan presented the truth to David, David judged himself in the light of that truth. Because David saw himself in the light of truth, there was no anger or need for revenge upon Nathan.

The parable of the ewe lamb, and the circumstances surrounding it, give us a complete and powerful picture of the love of self and the evil and cruelty it is capable of when allowed to run unchecked. As David himself said, unknowingly condemning his own actions, "The man who has done this shall surely die." There can be no spiritual life for the person who puts himself above all things, above the needs of all people in the world, and who in his heart wishes to pull the Lord down from His throne and rule in His place. (For all these things dwell in the interior degrees of selfishness.) But if such a person is led to the truth in the Word and judges himself in it light; if he can see his evils for himself; if he prays to the Lord for help in removing them; if he shuns them and begins to live a new life, then he can be saved and will not die.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat of the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken (Isaiah 1:18-20).

Amen.

Readings: 2 Samuel 12:1-7; Mark 1:1-11; *Arcana Coelestia* 904:2