

# Landry: Temptations are stronger when we're weakest

There's a story of St. Philip Neri that describes the saint watching a criminal being led to his execution. As the criminal passed, Neri apparently exclaimed: "But for the grace of God, there go I," an admission that he recognized that he, a priest, was as capable of serious sin as any other man.

This is almost the complete opposite reaction to that described in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee, seeing a tax collector – one of the worst sinners imaginable during biblical times – prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector..." (Luke 18:11).

When it comes down to it, this statement of the Pharisee is both his own judgment of others – particularly the tax collector – but also a moment of pride, believing that as a religious man, he would never be capable of such things.

You don't go from being a priest (like Neri) to condemned criminal overnight. Neither serious crimes nor serious sins occur spontaneously. They are usually the result of a series of small moral compromises which ultimately lead to the more serious ones.

The Catechism reminds us that this is how sin works: "Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin" (CCC 1863). One of the best examples of this can be found in 2 Samuel 11, when a moment of laziness becomes the starting point for King David to orchestrate the murder of one of his most honourable soldiers.

The story begins by telling us that as his army headed off to war, David stayed home in Jerusalem. We aren't given any particular reason why, but it's quite possible that David simply didn't feel like getting out of bed that morning (that's a feeling I understand well!)

When you're the king, who's going to force the issue? Since many of his closest friends and advisers would have been in the military, I would imagine that after a few days David would have felt lonely and bored. Soon afterwards, as David wandered on the palace roof, he noticed a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, taking a bath nearby.

On one of his better days, David would have averted his eyes out of respect for Bathsheba's dignity... but this wasn't one of those days. David was bored and he was lonely, so he chose to continue to look. David sent for her, and she was brought to the palace. A short time later, Bathsheba sent word back to David that she was pregnant, and that the baby must be David's child. Bathsheba, it

turns out, is the wife of Uriah, an Israelite soldier who had marched out to war without his king earlier on – the timing made it impossible for the child to be her husband's.

Can you imagine the scandal in the army when they would return to Jerusalem? Not only did their king not come with them into battle, but he also had an affair with one of their wives while they were away. David goes into full-blown damage control to hide what he had done.

Uriah is brought home from the frontlines, in hopes that he'd go home to his wife, giving a plausible explanation for her pregnancy. Unfortunately for David, Israelite soldiers practised celibacy for war (see 1 Samuel 21:5 and 2 Samuel 11:11) and Uriah was too noble to shirk his duty. No encouragement from his king – nor even an attempt to get him drunk – convinces Uriah to do otherwise.

In the end, David sends Uriah back to the frontlines with sealed orders that this honourable soldier is to be placed where the fighting is the heaviest and left to die. After a period of mourning, David and Bathsheba were married, their secret sin intact – except for a final ominous line: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (11:27), which foreshadows the prophet Nathan's role in turning David's heart back to God.

If you look back over the story, you can see that God gave David opportunities to choose virtue, and in rejecting God's grace, David's sins compounded into much more. David could have gone to war with the others, instead he slept in. David could have averted his eyes from Bathsheba, instead he chose lust. David could have come clean when faced with the integrity of Uriah, instead he chose deception and murder. How do we do better than David did in this moment?

The easiest place to start is the point where I believe David's story began to unravel. In his book *The Way*, St. Josemaria Escriva writes about the need to get up when we intend to (no snoozing!):

"The heroic minute. It is the time fixed for getting up. Without hesitation: a supernatural reflection and... up! The heroic minute: here you have a mortification that strengthens your will and does no harm to your body."

We also need to learn to be vigilant in those moments we were are bored, lonely, sad, tired, sick, or hungry, because, like David, our resistance and willpower will be lower. A priest once told me in confession that God understands we are weak in these moments – but the devil does not. The temptations we face will be at least as strong (if not stronger) in those moments we are at our weakest.

Finally, we need embrace the opportunity to come clean and admit our failure. What might have happened if instead of trying to trick Uriah into going home to his wife, David would have confessed his sin to this honourable soldier? For us, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a wonderful place to come

clean and start over after a moment – or even a series of moments – where we have succumbed to sin and weakness.

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