

David and Bathsheba

Series: Old Testament Character Studies
2 Samuel 11-12
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As you may know, 2 Samuel is the story of the reign of David over Judah and Israel. It covers a period of approximately forty years from his ascension to the throne of the tribe of Judah, when he was about thirty years of age, until shortly before his death. As the book ends David is old and stricken in years. The book can be divided exactly in half. The first twelve chapters are a record of David's triumphs, the last twelve a record of his tragedies. The first twelve describe a period in which David was eminently successful in consolidating the nation, driving away the invaders, and bringing Israel into a period of prosperity. The last twelve are an account of domestic struggle, rebellion, and civil war. This was a period of frustration and failure. If it were not for chapters 11 and 12, we would not understand the collapse of David's kingdom. These chapters record David's twin sins of adultery and murder. Let us begin reading with verse 1 of chapter 11, which supplies the setting for this story:

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel. They ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah, but David remained at Jerusalem.

In the spring of the year around here a young man's fancy turns to what the young women have been thinking about all winter. But in the east the thoughts of young men turned to war at this season. The nation of Israel had been locked in a bitter struggle with her ancient enemy, the Ammonites. Chapter 10 concludes with the final battle before they became bogged down by the winter rains. When spring came and the rains abated Israel went back to the field of battle, but with one crucial difference--David did not accompany them. It was traditional for kings to go into battle with their troops. But this spring David stayed behind in the safety of his fortress in Jerusalem.

It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking upon the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" So David sent messengers, and took her, and she came to him, and he laid with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her uncleanness.) Then she returned to her house. And the woman conceived, and she sent and told David, "I am with child."

David arose from his nap one afternoon and began to walk on the roof of his house which evidently held a commanding view of the neighborhood. His eyes happened to alight upon a young lady who was taking a bath on the roof of a nearby house. The Hebrew says, "She was good of appearance, *very*." She was very attractive, and David could not take his eyes off her. He inquired to find out who she was and discovered that she was the wife of Uriah the Hittite. This should have stopped him in his tracks, because she was the wife of another man. But more importantly, she was the wife of one of David's best friends.

Chapter 23 tells us that Uriah was one of David's bodyguards, his elite corps. These were men who had gathered around David during the period when he was fleeing from Saul. A number of men came out of Israel, men who were in distress who were discontented, and gathered around David and formed his personal bodyguard. There are some very touching stories of their loyalty to this man and their willingness to go to their death for him, if necessary. Uriah was one of these men. This should have given David pause. He should have gone no further.

But his motor was running, so he brought her to his house. He lay with her at a time when she was most likely to conceive, then sent her home. Just a casual, illicit affair, no big event--until the phone rang a few weeks later. Bathsheba was on the other end of the line and she said, "David, guess what? I'm pregnant." And David was frozen with fear. He knew it would be only a matter of weeks before Uriah would be home...anyone can count up to nine... and he would be exposed. The penalty for adultery in Israel was the stoning of both parties. David knew it could mean his life. Even if he were to be granted immunity because he was king he knew that his reputation would be destroyed.

There are a couple of observations we can make at this point. The first is that leisure times are times of danger. There is

nothing wrong with leisure. We need it periodically. But these are times when we need to be alert to assaults from the flesh. When we are under pressure, or when we are engaged in a ministry, we will walk by faith. We feel a great need to rely on the Lord. But then when the pressure is off the tendency is to relax and become self-reliant. Then we are most vulnerable to attack from the flesh. So we need to be alert.

The second observation is that failure in the Christian life is seldom a blowout; it is almost always a slow leak. Whenever we hear of a Christian who falls into some sort of moral decline--perhaps he runs off with his secretary or his neighbor's wife--we are inclined to think, or he may justify his actions by saying, that he was overwhelmed by temptation. But that is seldom the case. If we knew the heart of the man we would know that he has long been out of touch with the Lord, perhaps toying with the thought or cultivating the relationship in some way, and the act is simply the culmination of long-standing unjudged sinful thoughts or attitudes.

You can certainly see this in David's case. At the moment he saw the girl he should have turned his back and walked away. But he inquired after her and tried to cultivate the relationship. He should have judged the sin at that point. God would have given him victory over the temptation. But he didn't. So he fell into sin.

Now David was faced with the problem of what to do with this girl. His life was at stake. David was no dummy. You don't get to be king by being a dunce. And so David sent word to Joab,

"Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David, when Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was doing, and how the people fared, and how the war prospered. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." And Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house.

I can visualize this scene in my mind. Uriah strides into the king's chambers. David rises from his chair and these two rugged old warriors embrace. Then they engage in some small talk. "Uriah, how goes the war?" "Great." "How are Joab and the troops?" "Just fine." "Well I just wanted to get a report from you Uriah, good to have you back. I understand Bathsheba really misses you. Why don't you run on home and take a few days off?" David thought he could cover up his adultery in this way.

But Uriah was no dummy, either. He immediately saw through David's attempt at deceit and he would not go home. He went down to the guard room and slept with David's servants. When they told David that Uriah did not go down to his house David said to Uriah,

"Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing."

That must have gone through David's conscience like an arrow. The very thing Uriah would not do, David had done. Now David was a desperate man. He knew he had to cover his tracks in some way. So he threw a party, invited Uriah, and then sent him home drunk, thinking that Uriah's inhibitions would be lowered and his principles compromised. But Uriah was not that kind of man. He refused to go home and slept again with the servants.

The next morning David was beside himself. He had to do something. So he sent a letter to Joab his general telling him to put Uriah into the battle where the fighting was the heaviest and then to withdraw so that he would be killed. And Uriah delivered his own death warrant. But Joab changed the plan a bit. He realized that David's plan was so obviously treacherous that he himself would be implicated in the act. So he conceived a less incriminating plan. He assigned Uriah to the position where he knew there were valiant men, i.e., valiant Ammonites.

And the men of the city came out and fought with Joab, and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite was slain also.

Joab's plan was easier to cover over, but it involved a greater loss of life. Not only did Uriah fall but other valiant men of Israel fell as well. And now David was guilty not only of adultery, he was guilty of multiple murder. One wonders how many wives and children and mothers wept that night because of David's folly. We say, "It doesn't matter what I do as long as I don't hurt someone." But how can we ever know how far-reaching the implications of our actions will be?

David thought this was merely something between him and Bathsheba. But he was wrong.

Now, if you had told David a few months earlier that he would be an adulterer and a murderer, he would not have believed you. He was the man after God's own heart. But he learned, as we must learn, that sin enslaves us. If we give way even to what we think is the most innocent sin, in David's case the sin of lust, we become the slaves of sin. And sin increases to greater and greater unrighteousness, as Paul makes clear in Romans 6, when we submit to the flesh there is no end to what we will do. David discovered the hard way that by allowing sin to master him he became its slave.

Verses 18 through 25 record the contents of Joab's letter to David, and his instructions to the messenger, by which he hoped in some way to explain his change in plans and to set David at ease about the greater loss of life. He explains the death of these choice soldiers and then, in verse 24, delivers the punch line: "Uriah the Hittite is dead also."

David said to the messenger, "Thus shall you say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; strengthen your attack upon the city, and overthrow it. ' And encourage him."

"Don't worry about it, Joab. That's the way it is in war. You win a few, you lose a few. C'est la vie! Go back to the attack." Do you see how callous God's man has become--the tenderhearted sweet singer of Israel? His heart is completely hardened.

He still has a little tidying up to do. There is the problem of the baby:

When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she made lamentation for her husband. And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.

Bathsheba observed a brief period of mourning. Then David married her, legitimized the union, and everything was all right. David could relax. He had covered his tracks and avoided the consequences of his act. He was home-free.

Have you ever rebelled against God and then worked out a plan that seems to make it possible to avoid the consequences of that act? There is a great sense of release. You've gotten away with it! You feel downright cocky! But verse 27 says,

But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.

There are always consequences of sin. We never get away with anything. As someone has said, "The mills of God's justice grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine." It was because God loved David that he would not let him get away with this. A few months later the Lord sent Nathan to David. Nathan was a crusty old prophet of God. He had the fearsome assignment of walking into the king's chamber and accusing him of adultery and murder:

And the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared it for the man who had come to him."

David was incensed. What a dastardly thing, what an unjust act, to take a pet lamb from this poor man when the wealthy man had flocks of sheep! How could he do such a thing? David was righteously indignant: "He deserves to die. In fact, he ought to restore the lamb four-fold. Who is this man?" Nathan pointed his long, bony finger at David and said, "You're the man!" Just two words in Hebrew: "*haish atah*." Those words must have pierced him through! I'm sure his heart raced and his composure crumbled. He must have buried his face in his hands as Nathan went on to say,

"Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul; and I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives unto your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if this were too little, I would add to you as much more.'"

We have a loving, gracious Lord. His intent toward David was to fulfill him and satisfy him in every way. Our Lord wants to give. That's the way he is. He will not withhold anything from us nor leave any need unsatisfied. He wants to

give, and give, and give.

"Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do evil in his sight? You have smitten Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have slain him with the sword of the Ammonites."

Then Nathan delivered this four-fold judgment in response to David's wish that the rich man be judged four-fold for his act. First: "The sword shall never depart from your house." David's sons, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah, were slain in tragic, violent ways. Amnon was killed by his own brother. Absalom was slain by Joab in a particularly vicious way, wringing from David that poignant cry, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!" David had hoped that Absalom would succeed him on the throne. Absalom's name means, "The father of peace." But this young man became a headstrong rebel who died a violent death on the field of battle. Adonijah soon followed him. The sword never departed from David's house. His sons learned from their own father to be violent men.

The second judgment is given in verse 11: "Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house." If you trace the record of David's house it is a story of first one son and then another inflicting injury on other members of the family. It is a tale of hate, incest, greed, insurrection, and murder.

The third judgment is also recorded in verse 11: "I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun." That was fulfilled in the rebellion of Absalom when he forced David into exile and took his father's ten wives to the roof of his house (how significant!...Where did he learn that?) and violated them before all of Israel.

The final judgment is in verse 14: "The child that will be born to you shall die." That judgment was fulfilled when the child born out of their adulterous act died shortly after birth. You see, we don't get away with anything. God's character stands as expressed in his law. He is not some kind of cosmic wet blanket out to thwart us and frustrate us and keep us from fulfilling ourselves. His character is expressed so that we can know how to get the most out of life. Sin will kill us. There is no way to avoid the consequences. There is a law of inevitable consequence: we reap what we sow. We cannot reverse that law. The marks of sin were borne by David for the rest of his life. He never recovered entirely. His kingdom fell into total disrepair.

But we cannot conclude here with this oppressive judgment, for this is not the end of the story. In verse 13 David says to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." He didn't justify himself. He didn't try to defend his behavior. He didn't say, "Everybody else is doing it." He just said, "I've sinned." In Psalm 32, describing his feelings at this time, David says, "When I covered over my sin, my bones ached within me." He was physically sick when he tried to cover up. He knew he had to come into the open: "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord has passed over your sin; you shall not die."

You see, he is a loving, forgiving Lord. There is adequate power in the Lord to live in victory over any sin or habit. But should we fail, there is provision in Jesus Christ for forgiveness. "If we confess our sins," John says, "he will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Forgive for adultery and murder? Yes, cleanse from *all* unrighteousness. And restore us again to fruitfulness. We don't have to work our way back into God's good graces. We are accepted in the Beloved One. When we are willing to face our sin and walk in the light as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with him and he restores us again to a place of fruitfulness. Some of David's greatest psalms were written during this period and afterward. One such is Psalm 51:

**Have mercy on me, O God,
according to thy steadfast love;
according to thy abundant mercy blot
out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgression,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,
and done that which is evil in thy sight.**

Oh yes...he had sinned against Uriah, had sinned against Bathsheba, against the unborn baby, and against the nation of Israel. But basically his sin was against God. That is why David said, "I have sinned against you, Lord." Sin is ultimately against God. Sin is not just a matter of breaking God's laws; it is a matter of breaking God's heart.

...so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment.

"Lord, I deserve whatever I get. I'm not going to defend myself, I'm not going to justify myself. I deserve it all."

Verse 6:

Behold! Thou desirest truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

"Lord, don't let me cover over sin. I want to be honest, I want to bring everything out into the light.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Hyssop was a bush used to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the altar. David is speaking prophetically here of the coming sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the application of his blood which keeps on cleansing us (present tense) from all sin.

**Fill me with joy and gladness;
let the bones which thou hast broken rejoice.
Hide thy face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from thy presence,
and take not thy Holy Spirit from me.**

God's spirit had not abandoned him. God's presence was still with David. But in David's experience he sensed that feeling of alienation from the Father.

**Restore to me the joy of thy salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors thy ways,
and sinners will return to thee.
He will give us back the place of usefulness and fruitfulness.
Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God,
thou God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of thy deliverance.
O Lord, open thou my lips,
and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.
For thou hast no delight in sacrifice;
were I to give thee a burnt offering, thou wouldst
not be pleased.**

There was no offering that David could give for his sin. The Hebrews had no offerings for deliberate, willful sin. God had to create a new heart in him.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou will not despise.

The only thing that keeps God from forgiving us is a stubborn, rebellious heart. But if we bring our sin into the open, God will forgive us. He will free us from the sense of condemnation. He will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And he will place us again in a position of fruitfulness and usefulness. He will use us to bless others.

One of the things most significant to me in this whole story is the fact that David and Bathsheba had a son whose name was Solomon. He became the greatest king that Israel had. He had a son whose name was Rehoboam; Rehoboam had a son called Abijah; Abijah's son was Asa, etc. Matthew traces the genealogy all the way down the line to Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Christ was born. It was through these two--David and Bathsheba, adulterers and murderers--that God brought blessing to the whole world.

Joel says that God will restore the years that the locusts have eaten. It doesn't matter how devastated our lives may be. God will rebuild those lives. He forgives us and grants us grace to be everything that he wants us to be, and everything that we want to be.

Thank you, Lord, that you love us. We thank you, that you keep on cleansing us from all unrighteousness. There is no sin which will nullify the effects of your death on the cross. And we pray that we may face our sin, put it away, and claim afresh each day your forgiveness and power. We thank you in your name, Amen.

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