

THE HARDENING OF A HEART

SERIES: "YOU ARE THE MAN"

by Steve Zeisler

We have been studying an Old Testament account of immorality in high places in order to try to grow wise as Christian citizens and disciples regarding the immorality in high places that we're currently experiencing in our nation. Some observers have suggested that any concern is misplaced because, "everyone commits adultery." Or, at the very least, "everybody lies about sex." Why be concerned about something so trivial? These issues are inappropriate peccadilloes at worst, a matter of bad judgment.

But it's clear in Scripture, and it's probably clear from your own experience, that lying doesn't stay easily compartmentalized. The choice to lie ends up making you a liar. Lies don't float away, untethered to the place where they began.

Enduring children's stories usually have a core of wise insight into the human condition, and we all know the story of Pinocchio (1), the puppet-come-to-life who found that his nose grew when he lied. He was changed by the lies he told. And the same is true of us.

Romans 6:16 reminds us, "Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey--whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?" The choice to serve sin as a master, to act on its urging, makes us slaves; we become more and more like the thing we are doing. The sin reinforces itself and takes more and more control of us. Augustine said that the punishment for sin is sin. It is very unwise to trivialize the telling of lies.

THE COVER-UP

In 2 Samuel 11:6-27, is the story of how David's covering up made him a liar, how his sinning made him a slave, how he became hardened, and more of his life was overtaken by the things that were worst for him.

Verse 6:

So David sent this word to Joab: "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent him to David.

The first five verses of this chapter told the story of how David's complacency, arrogance, and self-indulgence, in a series of steps taken over time, led to adultery. He took Bathsheba, who was the wife of his friend, had sex with her, sent her back home, and assumed the event was over. But we're told in verse 5 that consequences followed--he found out that Bathsheba was pregnant.

So he sent to Joab, the general of his army, asking for Uriah the Hittite, her husband, to come home. Clearly, David's strategy at this point was that the man would come home and spend one or two nights with his wife, they would have intercourse, she would be discovered to be pregnant when he later came back from the war, and all would conclude that it was his baby.

David had never intended for the one-night stand to turn into a pregnancy. He had thought sin would stay usefully contained, that he could manage it. But he was wrong. He thought he could bring Uriah home, Uriah would act in a predictable way, and that would contain the problem. No one would be the wiser. But the results of sinful choices are not easily managed. The unexpected happens, and the cover-up demands more and more effort. Verses 7-8:

When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." So Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him.

David was telling Uriah, "Go home, kick back, relax, you've had a tough time." The word translated "gift" suggests it was a gift of food and perhaps wine--a festive gift.

Uriah was one of the *gibborim*, the mighty men of David. There were thirty of them who had fought with David over a long time, who had stood with him when he ran from Saul, who had been his companions in the wilderness, who had been the backbone of his army from the beginning. David and these thirty mighty men had been through a lot together. Uriah had a relationship with David that went well beyond that of sovereign and citizen, or even commander and soldier.

TRUTH MIRRORED IN A FRIEND

Verses 9-10:

But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master's servants and did not go down to his house.

When David was told, "Uriah did not go home," he asked him, "Haven't you just come from a distance? Why didn't you go home?"

Uriah's reply was probably the most painful speech David had heard in his lifetime up to now.

Verse 11:

Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open fields. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!"

Everything that David had chosen to do, Uriah, staring him in the eye, said he would not do.

Verses 12-13:

Then David said to him, "Stay here one more day, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. At David's invitation, he ate and drank with him, and David made him drunk. But in the evening Uriah went out to sleep on his mat among his master's servants; he did not go home.

There is no indication here that Uriah knew anything of the adultery behind David's interest. What Uriah probably assumed was that David's conscience was bothering him because he had not gone to war as kings should, but was staying at home babying himself when other people were bearing the brunt of the war, acting with courage, living with discipline because they cared about the purposes of God. When David sent for Uriah, I believe Uriah thought that David wanted one of his companions to come home and tell war stories, connect him again to the battle, and make him feel a little better about himself.

But Uriah was determined not to play that role. The king needed to hear from one of his men that there were still some whose priorities were right. The first statement he made in declining David's invitation to go home and relax was, "The ark and Israel and Judah...are camped in the open fields." He declared, in effect, "The place where God is present for Israel is not Jerusalem. Those who care about God's purposes are at war, David. They are living in deprived circumstances, endangering their lives. That's where men of God should be. You want me to come home and drink with you, clap you on the back, and pretend you're a soldier when you're not being a soldier anymore. I won't do it. You didn't used to be shallow. You didn't used to play games. You used to be the kind of man soldiers were proud to serve under. You used to regard the presence of God as important in your life. You used to take serious things seriously. But you've turned into some kind of self-serving wimp!"

That's what was behind the speech of Uriah. He didn't seem to have any idea of anything else at stake. He was challenging David's self-indulgence. In the Revelation, Jesus strode among the churches and spoke to John the apostle about lukewarm response to God. He said, "It makes me sick-it's nauseating!" There is something of that in Uriah's speech to David.

I'm convinced that this speech signed Uriah's death warrant, because David hated everything he heard. He had never intended to kill anybody. He had wanted the cover-up to work. He had wanted everything to be fine and the problem to stay contained. But then he had to stare at his old friend standing in front of him, as clear a mirror as there could possibly be, exposing him for who he was, making him see himself, making him hate himself. He decided that he was king and nobody would do this to him. Who was this insolent nobody, this Hittite who wasn't even born of the tribes of Israel, making David feel this way about himself? Nobody talked to him this way. (Only the people who loved him talked to him that way, but David didn't believe that at this point.)

It was insulting and painful, and he was going to do away with anyone who would say such things.

What did David see when he looked in the mirror that Uriah's face had become? Back at the beginning of David's story, Samuel had heard from God that Saul would be rejected as king. One of the sons of Jesse would be king. So Samuel went to Jesse and said, "Bring your sons to me, and God will tell me which of them will be king." All of the sons of Jesse except one were brought before Samuel, and Samuel looked at each one of them in turn. They were all impressive men, but the Lord didn't choose any of them.

"Do you have another son?" Samuel finally asked.

Jesse said, "Oh, yes--the youngest." David was the forgotten one whom neither father nor brothers in that family had thought worthy of bringing to Samuel for inspection. David was brought in, and the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; he is the one" (1 Samuel 16:12). The statement God made to Samuel was, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (16:7). That's why David was going to be king.

Uriah was a Hittite who began his life as one of the enemies of Israel. He was an outsider, a nobody. He didn't deserve a place among the mighty men of David, in the army of Israel, or near the ark of God. But God looks on the heart. I wonder if David remembered back to the time when he was an outsider who was included because of his heart. Now his heart was nothing like it once had been. Did he see himself and remember those things when he looked at Uriah standing in front of him?

There had once been a time when David revered the purposes of God, when David would not kill his enemy Saul, and he would not rejoice over the death of his enemies. He mourned the death of those who were trying to kill him because he cared so much about what mattered to God. There had once been a time when David humiliated himself dancing before the ark of the Lord because nothing mattered more to him than what God was doing in the world. He refused to serve himself in the place where God deserved to be served. And now here he was committing adultery, indulging himself, abandoning the ark, refusing to fight.

But even more telling may have been the contrast between David's and Uriah's respective relationships with the woman Bathsheba. Uriah was a man who made love to Bathsheba with honor. David had taken the woman dishonorably. Did he think of that? Here was a man who was what David himself was not in her life. Uriah would not go sleep with his wife, though it would obviously have been honorable and legitimate to do so. Did he hear Uriah saying, "I can control my sexual appetites when there's something more important at stake"? David couldn't stop himself sexually when he should have.

Uriah was everything David once had been and wasn't anymore, and David hated him for it. The man who exposed what he was becoming, who was bringing the lies out into the open, had to die. In short order, the lies had taken hold of David's life so much that he would do anything to defend them, including ordering the death of his friend.

HARDENING

Verses 14-20:

In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. In it he wrote, "Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die."

So while Joab had the city under siege, he put Uriah at a place where he knew the strongest defenders were. When the men of the city came out and fought against Joab, some of the men in David's army fell; moreover, Uriah the Hittite died.

Joab sent David a full account of the battle. He instructed the messenger: "When you have finished giving the king this account of the battle, the king's anger may flare up, and he may ask you, 'Why did you get so close to the city to fight? Didn't you know they would shoot arrows from the wall?'"

In verse 21, Joab went on to recall an incident from the book of Judges in which a man had been killed by getting too near the wall. The enemy threw a millstone down and killed him.

Let's pause and consider the role of Joab in this story. Joab was a violent and ambitious man. He had hitched his star to David's a long time ago. He was David's cousin, and he was determined that if David succeeded in pulling together the nation and defeating the enemies on every side, then Joab was going to rise up right next to him. He was going to go as high as David would go. But Joab did not care for God as David did. Joab had already killed Abner (2 Samuel 3) and Amasa (2 Samuel 20), two men who had once served Saul and would have served David. Joab was committed first and foremost to himself. But he was useful to David because he would do anything that David wanted him to. David could send the message to Joab, "kill Uriah," and no questions would be asked. Joab was willing to kill anybody who got in the way. He had no qualms, no conscience, no ethics.

With almost his last breath, David would say to Solomon, his son, "Do away with Joab. He is a violent man who sheds blood in times of peace" (1 Kings 2:5-6). It was Joab who had killed Absalom, David's son. It was Joab who had joined a rebellion against David himself at the very end of his life. Joab was a dangerous man.

I make that observation to ask you to think through your own experience. Are there people in your life whom you keep around, perhaps without even realizing it, because they enable you to do the worst things that occur to you, because they won't stop you, but will enable you in doing those things? Such people are helping you become a slave to sin.

Returning to the story, Joab didn't do exactly what he was told. David had said, "Engage the battle, then order all the other men back when the fighting becomes fierce, and let Uriah get killed on the spot." But Joab knew that if he gave that order, everyone would suspect him of something. That was much too risky to his reputation. So he decided to engage in a kind of warfare that would kill a lot of soldiers as they advanced on the fiercest enemy, got too near the wall, and were shot at in an unprotected place. Joab assumed that when David heard about it, he would be furious that Joab was willing to put to death some larger number of soldiers. But in verses 22-24, Joab instructed the messenger to tell David at the end that Uriah was dead, and then David's anger would be mollified. Joab was dead right.

Verses 25-27:

David told the messenger, "Say this to Joab: 'Don't let this upset you; the sword devours one as well as another. Press the attack against the city and destroy it.' Say this to encourage Joab."

When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him [for a required seven-day period]. After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.

The response of David is telling: "Send word back to Joab and say, 'War is hell. It's a shame soldiers die, but we've both seen it. What can you do? Don't let your conscience bother you.'" David was unflinching. He didn't act as if it bothered him at all that now many soldiers were dead instead of one, and that it was all because of him.

Someone has suggested that David was even capable of the further hypocrisy of taking credit for doing good to Uriah's widow when he was the one who created her widowhood. "The least I can do for my dear friend's young widow is take care of her. I'll marry her out of compassion."

What warnings and insights can we draw from this passage? First of all, look at verse 14. David wrote a note insisting on Uriah's death, sealed it, and gave it to Uriah himself to deliver. This is as callous, cold-blooded, and heartless a thing as you can do. He felt no pang of conscience about the enormity of what he was doing. He showed Uriah no respect even in the arrangement of his death. How did someone who knew better, who had walked with God, become that callous so quickly? What makes us capable of that kind of hardening?

THE SEDUCTIVE POWER OF LYING

Let me make some observations. First, lying is extremely seductive. Jesus made two profound observations about the nature of the devil: that he was a murderer from the beginning, and that he was a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). David now had beating in him the heart of the devil. Murder and lies were consuming him.

As I suggested at the beginning, the experience most of us have with telling lies is that each lie needs another one to bolster it. The more we are deceptive, phony, and manipulative, the more we have to be to keep up the facade.

This dialogue from the *Doonesbury* cartoon strip depicts the president being interviewed by the press:

"Ready, sir?"

"Of course."

"Let the truth be your handmaiden, sir."

"Of course."

"Mr. President, are you still able to effectively perform your duties without any personal credibility?"

"Absolutely. Just ask the world leaders I deal with every day. They trust me completely to do the right thing."

"Sir, to follow up, are you lying right now?"

"In which part of my answer?"

"In any of it?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Of course, you guys think I'm in denial."

"Are you in denial, sir?"

"No. I would deny that."

"Sir, are you lying about being in denial?"

"Define 'lying.'" (2)

Lying has a voracious appetite. It's never satisfied.

There is also a seductive power in being able to manipulate people and order the events of their lives, in being the only one who knows what's going on. David was overtaken by the seductiveness of getting away with it. When you know all the mysteries no one else does, when you can manipulate outcomes, when you can create a persona that impresses other people and nobody knows that it's phony, it's very heady indeed.

Think about how it would have been if David had gotten away with the first lie. What if Uriah had gone home, slept with his wife a night or two, gone back, found out later she was pregnant. Assuming Bathsheba wouldn't tell, Uriah would never have known that the little boy he was bouncing on his knee and treating as his own son, was David's son. But David would have known. David would have been the brilliant schemer who could laugh at foolish Uriah: "You don't know that I slept with your wife, and you don't know the son you think is yours is mine. You don't know anything. I know everything." He would have created life and dispensed paternity to the child. He would have been doing things that only God should do.

Although David's first plan went awry, nobody knew all the lies but he. Bathsheba didn't know of the word to Joab that Uriah should be executed. Joab knew about the execution, but he didn't know about the adultery. The only person who knew it all was David. And it all seemed to work. Uriah was dead, David was married to Bathsheba, the baby was born as his own

son, no one was the wiser. There's something very powerful about the inclination to deceive, especially when it seems as if you're getting away with it.

In the next chapter the roof is going to cave in, though. Nathan the prophet will come to him, and this is what he'll say in 12:9: "Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites."

Finally, self-deception is suggested here. David seemed to be talking himself into believing what he told Joab: "The soldiers might have died anyway. The sword devours one as well as another. Maybe it's not my fault. Maybe it's just bad luck." But Nathan would be very clear: "The sword was wielded by the Ammonites, but David, it was you who killed Uriah. It does no good to talk yourself into believing your lies. God isn't buying it. You don't change the truth by giving it another name." The inclination to lie to ourselves gets us nothing but anguish in the long run.

PURSUED BY LOVE

The conclusion, in verse 27, is the most important statement in chapter 11. David got away with it, by all accounts. He had married the woman, and the baby had been born. At least seven or eight months had passed. But the thing David had done displeased the Lord. And that is absolutely great news! What that means is that God cared enough about David to be displeased, that God was paying attention to his son, that he would not let him become the awful devilish figure that he was becoming, that he would not let David reign as the god of his own life. The Lord had seen what happened and he was going to do something about it. He was angry, loving, and persistent enough that David was not going to descend deeper into the darkness, and become more wicked, self-impressed, violent, and deceptive.

First Corinthians 10:12 warns, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." (NASB.) The warning is to those of us who think we're getting away with something. If God loves you, and he does, then he is displeased and he will do something about it. You're much better off acknowledging it and living with the process of renewal sooner than later.

You may have memorized Psalm 23. It ends, "Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." (NASB.) The word translated "follow" there can be translated "pursue" or "chase." Surely the goodness and lovingkindness of God are pursuing us. God is coming after us with mercy and love and sternness where it's needed, all for the purpose of making us who we ought to be. And as soon as we stop running and turn around and let him embrace us, he will do all the hard things that are necessary to make possible all the good things that he intends.

NOTES

1. Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, 1883.
2. G.B. Trudeau, *Doonesbury*, November 1, 1998.

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