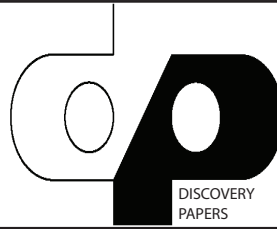


# ABUSING POWER

**SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:  
THE STORY OF DAVID.**



Catalog No. 20160228  
2 Samuel 11:1-27  
28th Message  
Paul Taylor  
February 28, 2016

*2 Samuel 11:1-27*

I remember my first taste of power. It was in third grade. I had been elected the third grade class president at Coleytown Elementary School in Westport, Connecticut. This was a huge opportunity for my grade school career. To be perfectly clear, it was shared power. I was co-president with Suzanne Baker. Incidentally, I had a crush on her at the time, so I wasn't particularly disappointed about sharing the presidency with her.

I started that year with so many ideas about how to change the world with my newfound authority. I can't remember any of the specific plans that I had, but I'm sure they were brilliant. I learned a lot about power that year. I saw that things don't always work out the way you hope. Power has its limitations. Power can disappoint you.

If you're new to PBC or haven't been here in a while, you should know that we're in the middle of a ten-month series working our way through the life of David, the ancient King of Israel. It's the longest narrative in the Bible besides the story of Jesus. We've called this series "A Life of Passion".

The story of David, like many of the stories in the Bible, is a story about power. David starts out powerless as the forgotten eighth son, tending sheep as a shepherd. God calls him to a role, but along the way he is chased as a fugitive by King Saul who wields far more power than he. Finally, David's time comes as king and he builds his base of power until he rules over the entire kingdom of Israel.

Today we turn a page into a new chapter of David's life. Having arrived as king, his family starts to come into sharper focus. Today we begin the chapter that we've labeled "Father."

Unfortunately, this chapter begins with a very dark story. We've seen that David is a complicated character. He's a mixture of honor and failure, loyalty and rebellion, humility and pride, sacrifice and manipulation. Progressive scholars want to portray him as a villain. Conservative scholars want to call him a hero. The truth

lies somewhere in the middle. He's like us. Villain and hero wrapped into one.

But this morning, we only see the dark side of David. This is David at his unimaginable worst. We will watch as David compels a young woman to have sex with him and then orchestrates the murder of her husband. Today we will see David, in agonizing detail, abusing power.

Frank Underwood, the rising politician in the Netflix TV show, *House of Cards*, reports that "a great man once said, everything is about sex. Except sex. Sex is about power."<sup>1</sup>

That thought has been true in several places throughout the story of David. We've already seen how sex and power can intertwine in dangerous ways. But nowhere is that more true than the story of David and Bathsheba that is found in 2 Samuel 11. This is a powerful man abusing his position to satisfy his lust.

The power of the throne is new to David. I think he's somewhat surprised by it. But I think he likes it. Then David stumbles into the dark side of power and discovers the limitations of power along the way. In the process, he violates one life and ends another.

David's story is an incredibly helpful story for us. We live in a world of power. Politicians and corporations and organizations and causes all seem bent on increasing their power. Flexing their muscles. Often we can feel like we are at the mercy of the powers of this world. Some of you have been victims of people or systems that have used their power to hurt you, sometimes in devastating ways. Our story this morning will speak to those of us who have been victims of abusive power.

I'm not sure that most of us realize just how much we have in common with David, the perpetrator of these crimes. We're often very aware of how much power the people around us have. But we sometimes underestimate the power and influence that we have. One of the things that I've become convinced of in the past few years is that powerful people can be especially dangerous when they don't realize the power that they have.

You may not realize it, but this is a room full of powerful people. You are powerful because of where you live. Where you work. The relationships you've developed. The money you have available to you. And on top of all that, you are powerful because God created you in his image with a unique kind of power, simply by being human. You have more power, influence, and authority than you may realize.

What do we need to learn about the power we have? How can we protect ourselves from abusing it? How can we avoid hurting the people around us? And most importantly, what does all of this have to do with how we relate to an all-powerful God?

The story this morning will offer something for all of us: for victims, for kings, and for worshippers. Let's watch David and see what we can learn from the darkest moment of his life.

## The Power of the King

One of the key words throughout this story is the word "sent." Sending is a way to exercise power. As we read our story, notice all the sending that happens.

### 2 Samuel 11:1:

**In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel. And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.**

David sent. And David remained. This was the time when kings were supposed to go to battle. But David didn't. He sent someone else.

Notice that the story doesn't begin with David abusing his power. Initially, it's not that he uses it for a bad purpose. It begins with him failing to use his power for the right purpose. As king, David was supposed to fight for the sake of his people. But instead of using his power to protect his people, he sent someone else and he remained behind.

Very few terrible mistakes happen out of the blue. Really big sins are rarely spontaneous decisions of stupidity. More often they are slow and gradual progressions. They start with one little decision that begins a journey where each successive decision is easier than the last.

And often, doing the wrong thing starts by not doing the right thing. Early in my Christian life, I spent so much energy trying to avoid sin. But lately, I've spent much more time asking what I ought to be doing, rather than trying to stay away from the things I should avoid.

There wouldn't be a story to tell this morning if David had used his power correctly. But David abdicates his real responsibility. This leaves him powerful ... and bored.

### 2 Samuel 11:2:

**It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful.**

Like many well-known stories, people often remember this story differently than it's actually told in the Bible. The picture many people have in their minds is of Bathsheba sensuously bathing on her roof. Perhaps she even knew David was watching and was trying to draw his attention. You see this perspective often in artistic depictions of this story, like this painting from 1899.

But the text doesn't say that Bathsheba was on her roof. It only says that David was on his roof. David's palace was up on a hill overlooking the entire village. Most of the homes in the village would have had open courtyards in the middle where cisterns could collect rainwater. Only David, from the roof of his palace, would be able to see Bathsheba or anyone else in their courtyard.

A few verses later we also find out the reason for her bath. It was the ritual cleansing that was supposed to be performed in the evening seven days after the completion of her menstrual period (Leviticus 15: 19-33). It may not have been a complete bath. It's likely that she wasn't fully naked. It was a ceremonial procedure to indicate that enough time had passed so that she was clean again.

So it's possible that this painting from 1599 is a more accurate picture of what David saw from his roof.

The point is that Bathsheba wasn't doing anything wrong. On the contrary, she was following the Law. She was performing a ritual cleansing in her courtyard where the water was. She wasn't looking for an extramarital affair. Bathsheba certainly wasn't seducing David.

It was David, who similar to Nebuchadnezzar at the peak of his power and pride, decides to walk around on his roof. In his own moment of boredom and pride, he notices Bathsheba and sends to find out her identity.

### **2 Samuel 11:3:**

**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?”**

His servants make a point of not only identifying Bathsheba, but identifying her father and husband as well. Eliam and Uriah are both listed as David’s “mighty men.” These were his elite soldiers who had probably been with him since his time as a fugitive. Eliam’s father, Ahithophel, was a court counselor for David.

I think David’s servants knew what he was contemplating. They wanted him to realize that this woman was the granddaughter, the daughter, and the wife of people that were important to him. They sensed that David was viewing Bathsheba as an object and they wanted to remind him that she was a person with significant relationships to other people in his life.

At this point, he should have snapped out of his trance. He didn’t. Verse 4 records what happens next.

### **2 Samuel 11:4:**

**So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness.) Then she returned to her house.**

It was a slow build up, but in a flash it happened. Listen to the progression of what David does in these four verses. David sent ... remained ... arose ... walked ... saw ... sent ... inquired ... sent ... took ... lay.

David sent. He took her. And he lay with her.

A few chapters earlier similar language is used when David sends for Mephibosheth, a forgotten cripple. David takes him into the palace. But in that case, David’s purpose was to bless Mephibosheth. In this case, his purpose was entirely different.

It began with David staying home from war. He failed to use his power responsibly. That left a void. People can be dangerous when they are bored. It’s true for kids and kings alike. David’s power wasn’t being put to good use, so he used it to send for Bathsheba.

When people describe David’s sin, they usually call it adultery. But the more I’ve studied this passage, the more uncomfortable I’ve become with that way of describing this incident. Adultery can take many forms, but in my mind, it implies a consensual relationship between two people. Saying that David committed adultery with Bathsheba makes it sound as though they engaged in a romantic affair together.

That doesn’t appear to be the case. David had all the power. Bathsheba had none. He was probably around 50 years old. She was probably around 20. He was the king. She was the wife of his soldier. Only David is ever condemned for this sexual encounter. Bathsheba was innocent of any wrongdoing. Even after his death, she is referred to as the wife of Uriah because she wasn’t unfaithful to him. She was sent for and taken.

Nathan uses the same word for “taken” in the next chapter when he constructs a parable about a rich man “taking” a poor man’s lamb to slaughter so that he could feed a guest. After Uriah dies and David takes Bathsheba as his wife, the word used is an agricultural word. It would literally read that David “harvested” Bathsheba.

David’s sin sounds like it is a lot closer to rape than adultery. One scholar has labeled it “power rape” to highlight the power dynamic.<sup>2</sup> The question is whether Bathsheba consented to this sexual encounter.

I’m convinced that the question is barely even worth asking. When the king sent for you, you went. Bathsheba wasn’t looking for this encounter. She didn’t want this. She was compelled by the king.

Now, it’s hard to know exactly what word to use to describe this. Even today in our culture, we have active debates about what qualifies as “sexual assault” or “sexual abuse” or “rape.” It’s hard enough to label behaviors in our culture. Looking back and labeling events from a completely different culture three thousand years ago is really tricky.

We’re going to spend more time in a few weeks talking specifically about sexual abuse when we get to the story where Amnon explicitly and violently rapes his half-sister Tamar. For now, we’re going to consider the overarching theme of power used in a variety of situations.

But when we call David’s sin adultery, I think we make two mistakes. First, we let David off too easily. This was not a consensual relationship. This was his sin alone, not a shared mistake. Second, we fail to realize that this event was just as much about power as it was about sex.

This isn't just about lust and desire. This is about David abusing power to satisfy his lust and desire.

David used his power to take what we wanted. But what he wanted was a person. David violated a person. A young woman that he knew. Whose husband was fighting his battles. Whose grandfather advised him. David sent for her and took her.

That is why it is so important for us to understand the power that we have. Do you realize how much power you actually have? Do you think about how you're wielding it? How do you use your power?

Parents have power. Bosses have power. Leaders have power. Teachers have power. But they aren't the only ones. Children have power. Employees have power. Students and spouses and boyfriends and girlfriends and friends and colleagues all have power.

If I asked you to name the powerful people in your life, I'm pretty sure you would start with all those people who have more power than you. You'd begin with the people who can wield direct influence over your life. This is usually where our focus lies. We're hyper-aware of those people who have more or different kinds of power than us.

But here's the interesting thing about power. Everyone has a boss. Everyone is a boss. Someone has more power than you. But someone else has less than you. Everyone has some kind of influence over someone.

Why do we spend so much time thinking and worrying about the people who have more influence than us? Many of us are always trying to increase our power rather than using it well. Perhaps we ought to be thinking about the power or influence we already have. Exploring ways that we can use whatever power we have for the sake of those who are more vulnerable than we.

Don't worry so much about the power you don't have. Worry about the power you do have. How are you using it?

## **The Voice of the Victim**

Up until now, David has taken all of the action in the story. He has had all the power. But then David learns that even the King of Israel doesn't have as much power as he thinks he does.

## **2 Samuel 11:5:**

**And the woman conceived, and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."**

This is the turning point in the story. At first David did all the sending. But now Bathsheba sends to David. Initially, no one could stop David. But now Bathsheba sends to David to let him know that his actions have set something in motion that he can't control. The power dynamic is upside-down.

Bathsheba seems powerless in this story. She is the victim. But here she exercises her agency. She acts. She finds her voice. She discovers that even victims are not completely without power. David's taking of her did not strip her of her basic autonomy as a person. This was the power available to her: she could make known the consequences of David's action.

For victims of abuse or violence, this is often called "breaking silence." It's the process of learning to say what has happened to you. It can seem like a small thing. But in reality, this is the great power that belongs to every victim of every injustice. They can make evil known. They can expose. They can bring truth to light. And if anyone should know this, Christians should know that truth has great power.

Bathsheba exposes the truth of David's actions.

There are many reasons why she might have chosen not to do this. Often, when victims of abuse come forward, they aren't believed. Sometimes they are blamed. How many times is it asked of a woman who has been sexually assaulted, "What was she wearing?" As if any possible clothing choice could justify sexual violence.

This is a very real issue in our backyard. An article was published recently in The Huffington Post about the problem of sexual assault at Stanford. The title was "Stanford Has a Trust Problem When it Comes to Sexual Assault." The author reports that only 2.7% of victims at the university felt comfortable reporting sexual assault. The low rates are attributed to people not believing that the cases will be handled properly.<sup>3</sup> Bathsheba is incredibly brave in exposing the truth. The truth has power. When victims find their voices, they are able to expose the evil that has been done to them.

Bathsheba's pregnancy puts David on his heels. He thought he was in control, but now circumstances have spiraled out of control. He makes a desperate attempt to regain control.

## 2 Samuel 11:6-11:

**So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. 7 When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab was doing and how the people were doing and how the war was going. 8 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. 9 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. 10 When they told David, "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?" 11 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."**

I think Uriah knew what was going on. Everyone at the court knew that David had sent for Bathsheba. Bathsheba knew she was pregnant. The messengers knew. Uriah is back at the court and we have no reason to think he was stupid or ignorant. I'm convinced that someone told him what had happened or he figured it out. That's why he refused to go back to Bathsheba and lie with her.

Uriah disobeyed a direct command of the king. But he explained it in a way that David couldn't fault him for. In fact, his loyalty and honor to his role as a soldier highlighted David's own failure to fight.

Once again, the victim discovers a surprising power. Uriah refuses to participate in the cover-up. He won't help David by taking away the consequences of his actions. Uriah's actions have the same effect as that of his wife's. He exposes the truth of David's sin. But exposing evil is a dangerous business. Uriah's choice would cost him his life.

Because we live in a world of power, we live in a world of victims. Many of us have borne injustice at the hands of those who are more powerful than us. Sometimes in

small ways; sometimes in devastating ways. What can the powerless do in the face of such extreme power? They can speak the truth. Victims can find their voices. What truth can you speak?

Maybe you've experienced injustice. If you're victim of abuse or assault, the first step is to be able to give voice to what has happened. That doesn't necessarily mean coming forward to the police or other authorities. It starts with just being able to acknowledge what you've suffered. Talk to a pastor. Talk to a friend. Talk to someone. Find your voice.

If you're not a victim, maybe you need to be the voice for someone else. How can you speak the truth for someone else? How can you help prevent or respond to injustice? In two weeks, we'll be holding several events focused on these kinds of issues. How can we as a church become a place where victims feel safe enough to find their voices?

No one in this world is as powerful as they seem. Even the seemingly powerless have the ability to speak. What truth can you speak?

## God Sees

The story in 2 Samuel 11 begins with David abusing his power. But then in two situations, he is shown that he can't actually control everything. He has faced the limitation of his power. And this drives him crazy.

## 2 Samuel 11:14-17:

**In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die." And as Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant men. 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 also died.**

We hardly recognize the man in this story. David is willing to cross any line necessary to make his problem go away. He needs to get back on top of this situation. This is the David who wouldn't execute Saul when he was trying to kill him. Now he sends Uriah back to the war carrying the very instructions for his own murder.

What do we do with David—the man after God’s own heart—who is apparently capable of rape and murder?

We’ll come back to that question next week. Our story today leaves this uncomfortable question hanging in the air. In fact, from David’s perspective, it seems like everything worked out in the end.

## 2 Samuel 11:26-27a:

**When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she lamented over her husband. 27 And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son.**

Once again, David is in power. David sent ... and brought ... she became ... and she bore a son. In the middle of the story, it looked like things might have been spiraling out of control. It looked like David might have lost his grip on the situation. But now everything has been tidied up. We are left with the distinct impression that David may have gotten away with this.

It looks like David has succeeded in coercing a woman into a sexual encounter and then murdering her husband to cover it up. Could this be so? Is that all there is?

It sounds like we should join the disillusioned people of God from Malachi 3:15 who said, “And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.”

Except that isn’t how the story ends. There is one more sentence. 2 Samuel 11:27b, “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.”

All throughout this story, God has been silent. And that is deeply unsatisfying. Where is God when evil wins? Where is God when injustice runs rampant? Where is God when those in power abuse and get away with it?

He may seem to be absent, but he sees. God always sees. Whether you are the abuser or the abused, you need to know that God sees. God sees.

To those of you who have some kind of power, this is a warning. There are repercussions for our actions. We can’t hurt people and cover it up. David found that he couldn’t really control Bathsheba. He couldn’t really control Uriah. He couldn’t really control Joab. And above all things, he can’t control God.

You might be able to control a lot of things in your life. But be warned. Use your influence well.

To those of you who are victims, this story can be a comfort, strangely enough. Yes, David’s power allowed him to violate Bathsheba and kill her husband. But they were not completely powerless. Both of them found their voice to expose David’s evil. Each of them paid for it. It cost Uriah his life.

I think Bathsheba is the most heroic woman in David’s story. Every other woman only has a brief appearance. Michal. Abigail. Ahinoam of Jezreel. They have important scenes where they interact with David, but each of their stories end abruptly.

Not Bathsheba. She was treated worse than any of the women. But she plays a major role in the continuance of David’s lineage. She gives birth to Solomon. She ensures that Solomon receives the throne at the end of David’s life. She is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:6. And she is likely the inspiration behind the “wife of noble character” in Proverbs 31.

Bathsheba’s story didn’t end when she became the victim of sexual assault. She was not undone by the power of another. Bathsheba is the sexual abuse victim whose story doesn’t end there.

In whatever way you have been a victim, you are not alone. God sees. It isn’t your fault. Your story isn’t finished being written. Be comforted. God may seem silent, but he is not absent.

God sees. He sees how you use your power. Be warned. He sees how others use power against you. Be comforted.

## Conclusion

Remember that powerful position that I held as a nine year old: president of the third grade? Most of what I learned is that power has its limitations. I wasn’t as powerful as I thought I was. Or as dedicated. I don’t think a single one of my ideas even happened. I left the experience disillusioned and disappointed.

It’s easy to leave this story the same way. For many people, all they know of power is abuse. Even David, the best king, is dangerous, lustful, angry, and deceptive.

When people hear about an all-powerful God, they can't help but assume that he's just as bad as everyone else they've known. No one with power can really be trusted. This is the atheism of our day. People disbelieve, not because they believe God doesn't exist, but because they believe God isn't good.

When they look at the church...that only seals the deal. Now, there are vibrant examples of the church using her power in sacrificial ways to protect the vulnerable of the world. But the picture that people know is of a church grasping for political power, defending itself under perceived persecution, and ignoring those people who are suffering around her.

David can't be trusted. The church can't be trusted. Why trust God?

Jesus.

If you want an example of power used well, don't look at David. Look at the son of David. From the first choice to trade power for vulnerability, he is the example that we long for. He doesn't grasp after power. He doesn't defend himself. He doesn't trample anyone. He heals the sick, he restores the outcast and he sees. He sees everyone!

And then the son of David is abused. He is humiliated. He is killed. Jesus suffers willingly for the sake of others. The all-powerful God becomes a victim for the sake of the vulnerable.

If you know people who are skeptical of an all-powerful God, show them Jesus. If you are a victim of someone else's power, look at Jesus. If you find yourself with power in this world, follow Jesus.

David abused his power to satisfy his desire and take a wife. Jesus was abused to show his bride that all he desired was her. Whether the evil you face is pressing against you or buried in your heart, come to Jesus. Let him forgive. Let him lead. Let him heal.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Chapter 9." *House of Cards*. Netflix. 1 February 2013. Web.

<sup>2</sup> "Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology." *Richard M. Davidson*. JulietDavis.com. Web. 18 February 2016. <<http://www.julietdavis.com/WST383/Bathsheba06-2.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> "Stanford Has A Trust Problem When It Comes To Sexual Assault." *Tyler Kingkade*. Huffingtonpost.com. 24 January 2016. Web. 18 February 2016. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/stanford-trust-sexual-assault\\_us\\_56a287f8e4b0d8cc109a02fc](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/stanford-trust-sexual-assault_us_56a287f8e4b0d8cc109a02fc)>