

“David and Bathsheba: An Epic Fail”

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Text: 2 Samuel 12 & 13 (selected verses), Psalm 51

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The story of David and Bathsheba is a story in three acts. Each act revolves around the same question: “What is David thinking?” The prelude for the first act is chapters 5 – 10 in 2nd Samuel. David becomes king over all of Israel. God makes a covenant with David. He has success in wars. And we read in chapter 9 that “David ruled over all Israel with justice and equity.” His enemies feared him and his people loved him. Everything was going his way. But then chapter 11 opens with these words (read vs. 1). As we pick up the story of David here, David was at the height of success, popularity, the pinnacle of political power, and that started to go to his head. He started to feel entitled. Other people could now go out and fight the battles for David. David didn’t have to go anymore—he was king! He was successful. So it was on one evening, when others were fighting his wars for him, rising from an afternoon nap, that he saw something that peaked his interest. (read vs. 2 – 4).

The story in its simplicity is brutal. He saw a beautiful naked woman and lusted for her. His attendants informed him that it was Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite. And in that statement they told David not only who she was but also WHOSE she was: married to Uriah. This information apparently made no dent in David’s desire and determination. He sent his men to get her, they had sex and he sent her home. Story over (or so he thought). We don’t know whether Bathsheba found the encounter flattering or fearful, but that hardly mattered to David. He just wanted an afternoon fling, and he was the king after all. He was entitled. Last week we heard about the younger, virtuous David, who couldn’t bring himself to kill Saul. We saw a man of true character. And just before the Bathsheba story we hear that David ruled with “justice and equity.” What David did with Bathsheba may well have approached rape. We see an epic fail of character. A shift in attitude towards personal entitlement met a desire that went without reflection. What was David thinking? Well, he really wasn’t thinking...and that started a cascade of consequences that would effect the rest of his life. The thing that unsettles me about this part of the story is how easy this kind of thing could happen to anybody.

Some time ago I served another and distant congregation. I started one morning reading the paper as was my habit. One article informed me that one of our elders had just been convicted of tax fraud. My first thought was, “MAN! Is THIS going to change my day.” The elder was a successful small businessman. Money was not an issue for the family. But as he was approaching retirement, he told me “I got greedy.” He made his confession before the session and tendered his resignation. But to his credit he stayed in fellowship with us as a member, knowing full well that everyone knew. He had a penitent heart, and everyone knew. To the credit of the congregation, they accepted him and didn’t shun him. At the very core of Christianity are the notions of forgiveness and reconciliation, and the congregation lived that out. The story of David helps us appreciate that if even the likes of David (who had a character of such integrity) can have a moment of moral failure, then any of us can. And if we have the self-honesty and courage to reflect on our lives I think many Christians can acknowledge their own moments as well.

David thought the story was over when Bathsheba left his bedroom. But....! (read vs. 5). Act 2 begins. David was at the height of personal prestige and power, but even the most powerful can't do everything. Pregnancies are hard to hide, and news of this pregnancy could seriously damage all that people revered about David. But rather than take the hit to his reputation David went into full-blown damage control mode (and Michael Cohen was not his lawyer). So he sought to manipulate the situation before word hit the streets. (read vs. 6-9). "Go home and wash your feet." What David wanted was for Uriah to go home and have sex with his wife. Problem solved. Except Uriah didn't go home. The next day David's servants told the king that Uriah slept outside David's home, presumably with other soldiers. So David called for Uriah again to find out why he didn't go home. Uriah said, "How can I possibly go home and enjoy sex with my wife when my fellow soldiers are risking their lives on the battlefield, and when our country and the Ark of the Covenant are at risk!" Quite an irony here. Here was King David enjoying sex with Uriah's wife while his soldiers were risking their lives on the battlefield for the sake of David's kingdom. But David, apparently, was not feeling guilty, so he tried his plan a second time. David invited Uriah to dinner and got him drunk, with the hope of loosening up Uriah's resolve. But still Uriah didn't go home to his wife. So, change in plan. David thought, time for more desperate measures. (read 14 – 17). The gall of David here is just so astonishing, that he would even have Uriah be the unwitting delivery boy of his own death sentence. It was easy for Joab the general to do his king's bidding. (read 26-27).

The Roman Catholics have a concept called "deadly sins". A deadly sin is a behavior that easily give birth to other sins. Lust is on their list of 7 deadly sins, and so it was for David. David was trying to take control (and thought he could take control) of his situation, but the irony was that his situation was controlling him. Apparently he got to the point where he believed he had no other choice than to orchestrate Uriah's death. But he did have a choice. He could have come clean about his affair with Bathsheba and taken his lumps regarding his reputation. As we will see shortly in the story David would probably have been far better off if he simply confessed what he'd done, then and there. But he didn't, and the consequences were disastrous for David.

A different David took a different root. David Letterman was the longest running host in late night TV history, taking the crown from his former mentor Johnny Carson. One day, 10 years ago, he found a parcel addressed to him that contained materials that was evidence of an extra-marital affair he'd been having with an actress. The blackmailer wanted \$2 million, or he would reveal the secret. This was dangerous for Letterman's reputation, but not only that, also for his marriage. He had been married only 6 months. What did he do? He went to the police. They set up a sting operation and with Letterman's help they caught the blackmailer. Shortly after that, Letterman confessed everything on his TV show, and publicly apologized to his wife. It was scandalous and he was criticized by his industry, but he kept his show and his marriage survived. It is said that "confession is good for the soul." If Letterman had given in to the blackmailer's demands, would his life have been filled with wonderings and worry and perhaps further demands? One way confession is good for the soul is that it ends the downward spiral.

David thought the story was over, now that Uriah was dead. But....! (read 12:1a). Act 3 begins. Way back in the beginning when the prophet Samuel was seeking out God's next appointed king, we heard God whisper to Samuel, "the Lord does not see as mortals see; mortals look on the outward appearance but

the Lord looks on the heart.” God saw through David’s attempts to protect his “outward appearance”, saw what was on David’s heart, and was most displeased. So God sent in the prophet Nathan. David had taken extreme steps to keep the cat in the bag so Nathan set a trap for David to ensure the cat got out. Nathan told David a made-up story of an injustice in order to lure David out to condemn the bad guy in the story, and in that way indirectly condemn himself. And David fell right into the trap. (read 12:1-4). The little guy had so little, but one thing he had was a loved lamb that he cherished. The rich man was looking for lunch and he didn’t care where he took it from. The parallels are pretty clear. How did David react? (read 5-7a). David condemned himself with his own words. What Nathan said next, speaking for God, begins with a reminder of the covenant God made with David and how God had been faithful to those promises. (read 7 – 9). God was saying, I was faithful to you but you have not been faithful to me. Here we should remember the 10 commandments. #10: you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife. #7: you shall not commit adultery. #6: you shall not murder.

What happened next is told very simply and with no colour at all, but what happened was quite profound. (read vs. 13). Months had passed since Uriah was killed. The terrible plan worked and David got away with it. He probably continued with his entitled attitudes. I think this encounter with Nathan snapped David back to reality: that God knows the heart, that God knew what happened, that David had taken God for granted and not upheld his part of the covenant, that David had had a total fail of character. Nathan’s words, speaking for God, provided David with a different point of view for looking at his own life. And he felt truly chastened.

In the text of the story David simply said, “I have sinned against the Lord.” Once again we can turn to the Psalms for deeper insight into how David was feeling. Many of the Psalms, in the ancient text, came with brief associated descriptions to give the psalm context. The introductory words for Psalm 51 are: “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” Let’s read Psalm 51 responsively, imagining that this is David’s heartfelt prayer to God, acknowledging with sincere honesty his sin, praying desperately for forgiveness. (read Psalm 51). In the psalm we read, “the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” I think David had that broken and contrite heart when we hear him say so simply in the story, “I have sinned against the Lord.” He appreciated, profoundly, what he had done. He felt guilty and sorry. And it’s because of that that we hear God say through Nathan in response, “the Lord has put away your sin.”

This is a tragic story. Bathsheba may never have wanted what happened to her, but she had no say in the matter. The innocent, loyal Uriah was killed to protect David’s reputation. David’s general Joab was co-opted into the plot to see an innocent man killed. With these subjects David failed to treat them with “justice and equity”. In David’s self-serving behavior he had strayed so far from God. As it says in chapter one of 1st Samuel, “how the mighty are fallen.” A tragic story, true, but such a hopeful story for us. For despite all that David had done, as it says in Psalm 51 “God will not despise a contrite heart.” Contrite, meaning remorseful and repentant. God forgives even such an epic character fail as this. Let this assure us that God forgives our failures in character as well.