

The Truth, the Whole Truth

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

August 23, 2009

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2 Samuel 11:1-5, 14-27, 12:1 (NRSV)

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

²It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. ³David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." ⁴So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. ⁵The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

¹⁴In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die." ¹⁶As Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant warriors. ¹⁷The 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 killed as well. ¹⁸Then Joab sent and told David all the news about the fighting; ¹⁹and he instructed the messenger, "When you have finished telling the king all the news about the fighting, ²⁰then, if the king's anger rises, and if he says to you, 'Why did you go so near the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall?' ²¹Who killed Abimelech son of Jerubbaal? Did not a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall?' then you shall say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead too.'"

²²So the messenger went, and came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell. ²³The messenger said to David, "The men gained an advantage over us, and came out against us in the field; but we drove them back to the entrance of the gate. ²⁴Then the archers shot at your servants from the wall; some of the king's servants are dead; and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also." ²⁵David said to the messenger, "Thus you shall say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; press your attack on the city, and overthrow it.' And encourage him."

²⁶When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. ²⁷When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.

But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD . . .

In the often misread story of David and Bathsheba, we hope to find some romance, even love. Instead, we hear a sordid tale suitable for true crime television.

The more I've studied this story, the more I've found myself coming to Bathsheba's defense. Here's an excerpt from the sort of sermon that gets my blood boiling.

I want to introduce you to just such a [moral] woman. Her name is Bathsheba, and her sin is recorded in the pages of 2 Samuel. We don't know much about Bathsheba, but most likely she was a godly woman. Her husband was a godly, moral man. It is unlikely that such a man would marry an ungodly, immoral woman. We have every reason to believe that this woman was a committed servant of the Lord. Yet she was guilty of adultery with King David!

The sinful, guilty, adulterous Bathsheba. A good woman whose adulterous love for David leads to tragedy and to the throne . . . yada, yada . . . NO! NO!

Here's the unadorned basics: David sees Bathsheba bathing in her own home. He wants her. He takes her. He sends her away. . . . that's it. Read it for yourself. There is no hint of

romance or love or goodness or morality. We were told that Michal loved David. Nothing like that here.

Joab

David accomplishes his murder of Uriah with the help of Joab, his commander. Joab later proves himself to have been the right choice, when he also murders. Joab is an important person in the later stories of David. Here is the entry on Joab from the *Harper's Bible Dictionary*. I've edited it a bit.

The second and most prominent of the three sons of David's sister Zeruiah. Joab was the commander of David's army during much of his reign. He seems already to have held this position at the time of the struggle for power between David and Saul's son Ishbaal (cf. 2 Sam. 2:13), but according to 1 Chron. 11:6 he was awarded his command in consequence of his valor and leadership during David's conquest of Jerusalem. He led the army to its first victory in the war against the Ammonite-Aramean coalition (2 Sam. 10:7-14), and he was in charge of the subsequent siege of Rabbath-ammon, the Ammonite capital (2 Sam. 11:1, 26-31). He conducted the census described in 2 Samuel 24. Everywhere he is presented as a skilled and courageous soldier and a shrewd politician, fiercely loyal to his king and people.

At the same time, however, he is shown to be unscrupulous, calculating, and occasionally brutal. Indeed the callous belligerence of the sons of Zeruiah is an important theme in the stories of David's reign, in which Joab and his brothers serve as foils to the gentle, vacillating king (cf. 2 Sam. 3:39). On occasions when David's excessive sentimentality seemed to threaten the stability of his throne, Joab's cold pragmatism was beneficial. He arranged a reconciliation between David and Absalom after the murder of Amnon (2 Sam. 14:1-24), and he intervened when David's extreme grief at the death of Absalom provoked a crisis in the army (2 Sam. 19:1-8).

(continued in the p. 3 textbox)

The only adulterer is David, who uses his power as king to forcibly take (yes, rape) a woman who is married to another man. He even knows who she is. He knows that her husband is one of his top commanders! Bathsheba is silent in the story until she informs David that she is pregnant. She is a victim of violence, not an adulterer. How could she refuse the king's summons? There is no indication that she knew why she had been summoned. Since her husband was one of David's commanders, the simplest guess would be that David simply wanted to talk to her about something. But not a single word of David's is recorded. He simply takes her.

And then . . . when she turns up pregnant, David makes another, even more terrible choice. He first tries to cover up his crime by having Uriah come home and sleep with his wife. And when Uriah refuses, David arranges for Uriah to be killed in battle. There is no good way to spin this. David chooses (there's that word again!) to murder Uriah, the husband of David's pregnant victim.

How could this be? Murder!? David is the man after God's heart. God looked at David and chose him from among all men. Through Nathan, God made an everlasting covenant with David (2 Samuel 7).

This doesn't make any sense, no sense at all. Perhaps that is why David's taking of Bathsheba is so often read as a lovers' affair, skipping over the murder of Uriah. Sure, Bathsheba went on to marry David, but with her husband dead, she had to marry someone, for nothing is ever said about sons. You could even interpret the law of Moses as requiring that if David has not brought the death penalty upon himself (as he probably has), he is at least required to marry her (see Deuteronomy 22).

How can I be so sure that this is a story of David taking? First, when the Israelites had clamored for a human king, Samuel had warned them that kings are takers. They'll take your sons, you daughters, your money, your livestock, Samuel said. King David took Uriah's wife and then his life.

But the more telling condemnation of David comes from the prophet Nathan, the same man as

brought God's promise of an everlasting covenant. When Nathan finds out what David has done, he tells David a story of a rich man who "took" a poor man's lamb to serve to a guest. David is at first incensed by the story for he knows that the rich man is guilty, even saying

he “deserves to die.” Then Nathan thunders, “You are the man.” David has become the taker, deserving of death. And God promises that the destruction David wrought in Uriah’s household will fall on David’s family. That is exactly what happens, as we’ll see next week. As the old saying goes, for David, it all goes downhill from here.

David’s heart

This story is told only in the book Samuel and is skipped in the book of Chronicles, where David’s story was retold by those writing centuries later. It certainly makes sense to leave it out if you are telling the story of Israel’s greatest king, the one from whose family the Messiah must come.

Joab

(continued from the p. 2 textbox)

More often, though, Joab was a violent, disruptive force. He assassinated Abner, the strongman of Ishbaal’s rump government in Gilead (2 Sam. 3:27), who had slain Asahel, Joab’s youngest brother, in battle (2 Sam. 2:18-23), and he ordered the execution of Absalom during the civil war (2 Sam. 18:9-15). Both of these killings were without David’s knowledge, and the second was against his explicit orders (2 Sam. 18:5; cf. 18:12). Joab also slew Amasa (2 Sam. 20:8), with whom David had replaced him as commander of the army after Absalom’s revolt. In the contest over the succession to David’s throne Joab sided with Adonijah against Solomon (1 Kings 1:7), a mistake that cost him his life. Solomon charged him with the deaths of Abner and Amasa, and he was executed by Benaiah (1 Kings 2:28-34), who became commander of the army under Solomon (1 Kings 2:35).

But the story survived in the book of Samuel. David’s sin is even presented as the cause of the terrible events that would soon unfold. Why has God given us this story? What are we to learn?

Too often, this story is used as a warning about the dangers of lust and temptation, as if we need warnings. We know quite well that lust and arrogance lurk in all our hearts. The story can’t be merely a warning that those in power are nearly always takers – we know that too.

I don’t think this story is such a warning at all. Rather, it calls us to self-examination. We’d make a terrible mistake if we imagined that we could never do such things. David is the psalmist, the man with a heart seen by God, and he commits these unspeakable horrors. The story calls us to honesty about ourselves and about our life-with-God. Too often, Christians imagine that being “good” Christians means imposing perfectionism on ourselves and on others. This story ought to drive home the truth that such a way can never be our way. Eugene Peterson rightly notes that the Jesus way includes the way of imperfection,¹ for David was a most imperfect man.

As we’ve worked through the stories of David, we’ve often had to work hard to find the man that God found. But we were looking in the wrong place. We

needed to look past his many sins and see his heart, as expressed in his many psalms. There, we find a man who knew that he needed to acknowledge his sin: “When I declared my sin, my body wasted away” (Psalm 32). He knew what his sin was doing to him: “There is no health in my bones because of my sin” (Psalm 38). He prayed for forgiveness: “Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for no man living is righteous before thee.” And he waited for the Lord: “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope” (Psalm 130).²

You might pull out a Bible right now and take a few minutes to read, slowly and quietly, Psalm 51. The biblical title for this psalm tells us that it was David’s prayer after being confronted by Nathan for his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah. We don’t want to model ourselves on David, but we should ask ourselves these questions after reading Psalm 51: Am I truly as devastated by my sin, as David was by his? Do my own prayers begin: “Have mercy on me, O God”? Does my heart strive for God, even as I fall on my knees, thankful for the gift of God’s unfailing grace?

¹ & ² from Peterson’s book, *The Jesus Way: a conversation on the ways that Jesus is the way.*

Is it romance or is Bathsheba “taken?”

If you’ve read the main text of this study, you know that I think this is a story of a king’s “taking,” just as warned about by Samuel and just as in Nathan’s parable afterward. But I’m sure that for many people, this is a surprising or even shocking conclusion. After all, this is David we are talking about! The following is taken from a commentary on the book of Samuel by Walter Brueggemann, widely acknowledged as one of the pre-eminent and most influential OT scholars working today.

David has been resting on his couch (v. 2). He was at leisure and saw what he wanted, a woman “very beautiful.” We do not know her name. David asks her name, but he does not measure the cost of his desire. He gets her name; her name is dangerously hyphenated: “Bathsheba—daughter of Eliam, wife of Uriah the Hittite.” She has no existence of her own but is identified by the men to whom she belongs. Now David knows who she is—and whose she is. David does not pause, however, because he is the king. The mention of Uriah might have given David pause, but it does not. David acts swiftly, as he has always done. He is not a pensive or brooding man but one who will have his way.

The action is quick. The verbs rush as the passion of David rushed. He sent; he took; he lay (v. 4). The royal deed of self-indulgence does not take very long. There is no adornment to the action. The woman then gets some verbs: she returned, she conceived. The action is so stark. There is nothing but action. There is no conversation. There is no hint of caring, of affection, of love—only lust. David does not call her by name, does not even speak to her. At the end of the encounter she is only “the woman” (v. 5). The verb that finally counts is “conceived.” But the telling verb is “he took her.” Long ago Samuel had warned that kings are takers (1 Sam. 8:11–19). Gunn (1975) calls it “grasping.” Mostly David has not had to take. He had everything gladly given to him by Yahweh, by Jonathan, by Abigail, by his adoring followers.

We have before us in chapter 11 a transformed David, however. Now he is in control. He can have whatever he wants, no restraint, no second thoughts, no reservations, no justification. He takes simply because he can. He is at the culmination of his enormous power.

In verse 5 the woman speaks for the first time. She says only two words, but they are utterly shattering: “I am pregnant” (*harah ’anoki*). David is not the last person to have his world shattered by this message. Nonetheless the world-shattering words of Bathsheba completely nullify the royal power of David. David had been in control. Now, in an instant, as long as this message takes, his control ends. Notice “the woman” makes no demand or threat. Her words say enough and say it all.

Encounter

a time for fellowship, worship, and learning

Are you ready for a life with God that makes a real difference? Would you like to develop a passion for Scripture? Would you like to make new friends in a casual, Christian setting? The time has come . . . **Encounter** is coming to St. Andrew, beginning September 9 at 6:45 in Wesley Hall.

Featuring the music of Jodi Wright, the teaching of Scott Engle, and the pastoral leadership of Rev. Steve Robertson, **Encounter** will be a Wednesday evening time for connecting with God, his word, and one another. Each week, we’ll worship together with fresh and engaging music. We’ll encounter God’s word in an innovative time of teaching and preaching, beginning with the Gospel of Mark. We’ll make new friends and share our joys and concerns. Each week . . . Every week.

We’ll be offering a children’s program, as well as childcare for the littlest ones. We are even going to make meals available at 5:30 in Youth Common, much like last fall’s popular “Soup for the Soul.”

Whatever you think this is . . . well, it is probably a bit different.
You’ll have to come see for yourself!