

Where is David's heart?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a five-week series

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2 Samuel 11:2–25 (NIV)

²One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, ³and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, “She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” ⁴Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness.) Then she went back home. ⁵The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, “I am pregnant.”

⁶So David sent this word to Joab: “Send me Uriah the Hittite.” And Joab sent him to David. ⁷When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going. ⁸Then 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. ⁹But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master’s servants and did not go down to his house.

¹⁰David was told, “Uriah did not go home.” So he asked Uriah, “Haven’t you just come from a military campaign? Why didn’t you go home?”

¹¹Uriah said to David, “The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my commander Joab and my lord’s men are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!”

¹²Then 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. ¹³At 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.

¹⁴In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. ¹⁵In it he wrote, “Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die.”

[David’s orders are followed and Uriah is killed. Bathsheba mourns her husband but then is taken to David’s palace to be one of his wives. She bore him a son. We’re told that “the thing David had done displeased the LORD.”]

The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, ³but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴“Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

⁵David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! ⁶He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

⁷Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! . . .”

How could it be? How could this man “after God’s own heart” commit such terrible crimes? What does this say about our own life with God?

The more I’ve studied this story, the more I’ve found myself coming to Bathsheba’s defense. The sinful, guilty, adulterous Bathsheba. A good woman whose adulterous love for David leads to tragedy and to the throne . . . yada, yada . . . 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.

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 best warriors, 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 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 (1 Samuel 8). They'll take your sons, your 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 who 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. For David, it's all 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.

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 told us this about David? 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. Likewise, the story can't merely be a warning that those in power are nearly always takers – we know that too.

I don't think this story is 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 us 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 the reader works through all the stories of David, it is often hard to find the man that God found. But we tend to look 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?

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 (1 Samuel 8) and just as in Nathan’s parable afterward (2 Samuel 12). 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).¹ 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.

1. Most modern translations soften verse 4. In the Hebrew it is closer to: “So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her.”

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

I don't know that there is a more challenging story in all of the Bible. We were told that God doesn't see people the way we do, God sees the heart. We were told that David was a man after God's own heart. David, the idealized king of Israel. David, the one from whom God Messiah must spring. And yet, David commits crimes that seem impossible for this psalmist, the chosen of God.

First, what do you make of Brueggemann's claim that this is not a story of an illicit affair, but of rape and murder? Read the story carefully and try to shed preconceptions.

Second, what do you think this story tells us about our own life with God? Anything? Is this just a one-off account of something you would never do? Or might it speak to us of the impossibility of perfection. There are no easy answers; you can bet that people will differ in what they see in this story!

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Sermon Notes
