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2 Samuel 11:1-15+

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“More Bible Stories: David, Bathsheba and Looking for Trouble”

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.

It 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. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, “This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” So 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. The woman conceived; and she sent, and told David, “I am pregnant.”

So David sent word to Joab, “Send me Uriah the Hittite.” And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, “Go down to your house, and wash your feet.” Uriah went out of the king’s house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king’s house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, “Uriah did not go down to his house,” David said to Uriah, “You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?” Uriah said to David, “The ark and Israel and Judah remain 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 such a thing.”

Then David said to Uriah, “Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back.” So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

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, so that he may be struck down and die.” 2 Samuel 11:1-15, NRSV

INTRODUCTION

And a brief “rest of the story” of David, Uriah, Bathsheba, Nathan and the baby, from 2 Samuel 11 and 12.

Joab sent Uriah to a spot where he knew the enemy’s strongest men were fighting. And Uriah was killed along with several other soldiers. Then Joab sent a battle report to David. “Some of the king’s men were killed, including Uriah the Hittite.”

When Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. When the period of mourning was over, David sent for her and brought her to

the palace, and she became one of his wives. “But the Lord was displeased with what David had done” (2 Samuel 11:27b).

So the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to give David this report: “There were two men, one was rich, and one was poor. The rich man owned a lot. The poor man owned nothing but one little lamb. One day a guest arrived at the home of the rich man. But instead of killing an animal from his own flock or herd, he took the poor man’s lamb and killed it and prepared it for his guest.”

David was furious about this presumed true report from Nathan, saying, “Any man who would do such a thing deserves to die!

Then Nathan said to David, “You are that man! That’s what you did; you have essentially murdered Uriah the Hittite and stolen his wife. From this time on, your family will live by the sword because you have despised God by taking Uriah’s wife to be your own. Then David confessed to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

Nathan replied, “Yes, but the Lord has forgiven you, and you won’t die for this sin. But the baby Bathsheba is carrying will not live”, and that baby did not. David comforted Bathsheba, and later slept with her. She became pregnant again, and gave birth to a son, named Solomon. (Solomon, from shalom: all encompassing peace.)

The story continues; things are never the same for David or his family. The wrongs can not be made right. Are there any words *scarier* than 2 Samuel 11:27b: “the Lord was displeased with what David had done”?

Any words more humble than “Have mercy on me, O God” (Psalm 51:1)? Any plea more appropriate than that, when we come to realize “just how great our sins and miseries are” (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 2)?

CONTEXT

In their cultural context David had all the power. Marriage was different, obviously; David already had several wives. David was using and abusing his power in so many ways, and especially with Bathsheba. In those days, if the king summoned someone they had to go or face execution.

Now, many translations call the relationship between David and Bathsheba adultery, although rape, while uglier, is probably a more accurate description. There’s so much we don’t know and many people have read a lot of “assumptions” into this account. One traditional version is that Bathsheba was a temptress who trapped David. The feminist version is that David was a pig. Even if he *wasn’t* ever charged with sexual assault, we know he was guilty of attempting a cover-up and then, Uriah’s murder because Uriah demonstrated the self-control that David lacked.

Just to be clear, we understand the Bible seems to condone behaviors from a different time and place, that people of faith now feel are not God’s will: slavery, oppression, genocide, polygamy, discrimination, etc. We believe that the word of God

reforms us all the time. We are reformed and ever reforming by God's word. We give highest honor to the law of "loving God and neighbor". We believe those ancient practices, acceptable then, don't demonstrate love now.

And yet, this episode is important in the whole context of the Bible. It makes it into Jesus' birth record from Matthew 1:6, that: "David was the father of Solomon (whose mother was Bathsheba, the widow of Uriah). Solomon was the father ...". Only a few women are mentioned in that genealogy even though every birth needed a woman. Bathsheba is one of those who earned a named role.

The stories of King David are in the Bible to help us know what God was trying to teach us and David, none of which he was very good at. Lessons we still struggle with, 3000 years later- we've spoken about them in weeks' past. That:

1. Mindful discernment is the best way to make decisions.
2. Our responsibility is to worship God and respect our partners.
3. Violence is not the best answer.

Second Samuel 11 begins by pointing out that David wasn't where he should have been. "In the springtime, when kings go off to war, David was home, taking a late afternoon nap". Before and after this, David had been active in battles. Not this time. He was lounging, loafing and looking for trouble from the vantage point of his kingdom's finest home.

This episode in David's story seems to be an exception to the norm. It's out of character. That's good because we expect our leaders to be honest and trustworthy ;-). It's also a reminder that *everyone* has the potential to make significant mistakes. It's easy to judge and criticize. It's harder to live a pure life. And even being gracious and forgiving, we know what happens when people choose unwisely: Innocents suffer. Families get broken. God has to work in the context of our free will and inherently sinful nature. And thankfully God does!

PREQUEL

Do you remember learning this story as a child? Many churches skip it for kids and maybe try to use it with teen-agers. The bulletin cover demonstrates just how difficult this lesson is to teach to children. The most important point certainly isn't that Bathsheba took a bath!

Some of the other visual aids are from the Christian Education resource room on the second floor. The posters are of the story-challenge from Nathan and the remorse David felt. Nathan says: "You are the man". David pleads with God for forgiveness. These posters may be from some of your childhoods!

Some lessons cause parents trouble. With an apology, we note that the whole of scripture is not easy or nor is it rated for general audiences. I've heard stories of how David and Bathsheba lead to "birds and the bees" talks, on the way home on Sunday

School, children asking questions before parents were ready to answer them. There also is a local account of a surprised boy, who after reading something R-rated in his “third-grade Bible”, asked his teacher if she knew what was in there?!

The Bible sometimes teaches us by asking us to learn from others’ sin.

LESSONS

All the lessons we need to learn from this text are summed up pretty well in the Epistle of James, chapter 4. The Message paraphrase says it this way:

Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves. You lust for what you don’t have and are willing to kill to get it. You want what isn’t yours and will risk violence to get your hands on it. ((Doesn’t *that* sound like David?))

You wouldn’t think of just asking God for it, would you? And why not? Because you know you’d be asking for what you have no right to. You’re spoiled children, each wanting your own way.

You’re cheating on God. If all you want is your own way, flirting with the world every chance you get, you end up enemies of God and his way. And do you suppose God doesn’t care? The proverb has it that “God’s a fiercely jealous lover.” And what he gives in love is far better than anything else you’ll find. It’s common knowledge that “God goes against the willful proud; God gives grace to the willing humble.”

So let God work his will in you. Yell a loud *no* to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet *yes* to God and he’ll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it’s the only way you’ll get on your feet. ...

God is in charge of deciding human destiny. Who do you think you are to meddle in the destiny of others? ...

As it is, you are full of your grandiose selves. All such vaunting self-importance is evil. In fact, if you know the right thing to do and don’t do it, that, for you, *is* evil. (James chapter 4. The Message)

Our lessons from David’s story:

1. We are selfish beings. How easy it is for us to fall, to fail, to relax around temptation just a bit, and find the domino effect of sin in our lives. Living lives of integrity and taking seriously God’s desire for us to **use** our brains, our discernment, and **live** spirit-empowered lives, helps keep us from falling, failing, slipping into some temptation that is right nearby.

2. We are not going to be perfect, never even close. “If we say that we have no

sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). And Jesus set the bar high with regard to sin; even our impure fantasies are sinful (Matthew 5:28). But, because of grace we live a life filled with peace, not a life filled with guilt. The sweetest “Words of Assurance” statement I often use after our time of confession is this:

While it is true that we have sinned, it is a greater truth that we are forgiven through God’s love in Jesus Christ. To all who humbly seek the mercy of God I say, in Jesus Christ your sin is forgiven. Thanks be to God.

3. I’ve never liked David’s statement to Nathan (in 2 Samuel 12: 13): “I have sinned against the LORD”. The phrase in his prayer recorded in Psalm 51:4 seems even worse: “Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight.” Didn’t David sin against Bathsheba and Uriah, and the other soldiers who lost their lives in the battle that killed Uriah? No.

Sin is missing *God’s* mark. Sin is what we do that is not pleasing or honoring to God. It isn’t what other people think about us, or suffer because of us. The *effects and consequences* of our sin is what has impact on other people. Sin is between us and God, only. Like where it says “The Lord was displeased with what David had done” (2 Samuel 11:27b).

Now, there’s good and bad news. We love to sing of the:

Marvelous grace of our loving LORD.

Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt.

Grace, grace, God’s grace.

Grace that is great than all our sin. (CCLI# 637582)

But the effects and consequences of our inappropriate actions can’t be minimized. There’re broken hallelujahs when God is not praised or honored. When homes and hearts are scarred by lost trust. God forgives and forgets. Marvelous grace! People may find it harder. Someone may never recover from the effects of your sin. Like with David, current and future generations have to live with the effect.

Jesus did suggest, when it comes to others’ sins that don’t impact us directly, we should mind our own business. From John 8:

The religion scholars and Pharisees led in a woman who had been caught in an act of adultery. They stood her in plain sight of everyone and said, “Teacher, this woman was caught red-handed in the act of adultery. Moses, in the Law, gives orders to stone such persons. What do you say?” ...They kept at him, badgering him. He straightened up and said, “The sinless one among you, go first: Throw the stone.” ... Hearing that, they walked away, one after another, beginning with the oldest. The woman was left alone. Jesus stood up and spoke to her. “Woman, where are they? Does no one condemn you?” “No one, Master.” “Neither do I,” said Jesus. “Go on your way. From now on, don’t sin.” (John 8:3-11, the Message). Good advice from Jesus.

So, David learned lessons from his failings. We can, too:

1. Live lives of integrity, take seriously God's desire for us to use our brains, our discernment skills, and to live spirit-empowered lives.
2. In Jesus Christ our sin is forgiven. Thanks be to God.
3. Our sin is anything "not pleasing or honoring to God". The *effects and consequences* of our sin may also have a profound impact on others.
4. Let God do the judging; repent when you should; forgive when you can.

Walter Brueggemann, the prolific Old Testament scholar ends his commentary of this account with the reminder that we always live in hope:

The birth of this new son is not only another birth, recorded to indicate that the immediate curse is past; it is *the* birth, the birth that will dominate the entire story to come. The child's name is Solomon, derived from salom (shalom). He is loved and treasured by Yahweh. ...

God has an amazing capacity to work more life at the border of death, to act in promise-keeping ways just when the promise seems exhausted. This account of David and Bathsheba is a tale of alienation and judgement; in its midst however, are gestures of grace made by Yahweh. This birth is marked by Yahweh's love, not anger. (1 & 2 Samuel, *Interpretation*, p 284).

This is God's story of redeeming love and "a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11).

Hallelujah, it goes on and on.

Hallelujah.