

Insights on David and Bathsheba (Adultery)

2 Samuel 11

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I. Introduction

King David is at or is a little beyond his 50-year mark - having won fathomless battles, including a nearly victorious battle fresh off the heels of the Ammonites. Unfortunately, instead of fighting his own battles, David chooses 'to let his men fight his battles for him' (www.bible.org: 2003) and this was in violation to what the Israelites and God had intended of their kings and leaders, and that was 'to fight battles' (1 Samuel 20) and 'to lead nations into battle' (1 Samuel 9:16) respectively. It is a time in David's life (possibly during his mid-life) when consciousness of his vulnerability to sin is at its apogee.

There are likely two camps as King David's life unfolds – the first camp being those who personify a large than life image of a god-fearing king whose passion towards God overshadows his faults, and the second being those who magnify and intensify his criminal act of adultery and murder while failing to appreciate his humanness and passionate heart for God. Neither polarities should be taken uncritically as it is evident that David's act of disobedience is most human and should be viewed in its proper perspective to that of his accomplishments – 'a valiant warrior on the battlefield' (Swindoll, 1997: 180), a composer of music and psalms and a man of passion and compassion. David's sins may have been exaggerated through the centuries with him taking on the position of King and the pressure he assumed being ordained to his post.

This paper will discuss the following points in the context of contemporary men of the 21st century when considering the implications of David's affair with Bathsheba: past victories as a prelude to one's downfall; taking heed when in positions of power; scrutinizing and guarding one's life and considering the consequences before taking action.

II. Past victories as a prelude to one's downfall

As contemporaries, what must be heeded about illicit affairs cannot be better stated than that noted by Peterson (1997: 182), 'The story of David and Bathsheba transpire in David's mature years, when he's in his prime, having passed through hard testings and in the testings been show to be a loyal friend, a courageous leader, a wise king.' In his younger days David was tested for his inexperience through Goliath. As a man around fifty and in his prime, David experiences another form of testing, that of political astute and pride, after having achieved innumerable victories. Conroy (1983: 117) suggests that 'At the height of his power David begins to act as a typical despot, dealing with life and death simply in accordance with his desires and self-interest.'

Harlow (1970:93) points out David's successes as a king in the first ten chapters of 2 Samuel and stresses, 'When things are going well we should be especially careful. Anyone can fall into sin if he forgets the Lord.' This should be a foresight for anyone who revels in his successes.

III. Taking heed when in positions of power

Goldingay (2001:242) poignantly explicates, 'Their very giftedness gives them the skill to rationalize their behaviour away,' as a possible vulnerability of David's kingly position.

Prior to arriving at any rash conclusions that David was a conniving lustful beast and that his appetite was merely satisfied through sexual gratification, one must consider the verse in 2 Samuel 11: 3 (NIV) , '...The man said, "Isn't this Bathsheba, *the daughter of Eliam* and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?"' Bailey (1990: 87) concurs that this verse resembles that of other verses depicting women, '...where two pieces of identifying information are provided on the

woman, it is the first piece which conveys her primary importance to the narrative.' Eliam was the son of Ahithophel, a key advisor to David, and as so happens, Bathsheba was his granddaughter. As a point of observation, it cannot be denied that David had a keen awareness of the significance of political connection and intrigue when he caught sight of Bathsheba. Some commentators contend that David's liaison with Bathsheba as merely that of political prowess. Yet the fact that Bathsheba was another man's 'ewe lamb' (2 Samuel 12) should have sufficed to serve as a warning that she was off limits – her marital status and as she happened to be the wife of David's faithful warrior.

A second point not to be overlooked is that of Bathsheba's 'alleged' innocence as she herself may have had hidden political motives in the entire act. Though various commentators have explicated on the architect of houses in during David's time in 900 B.C. and how typical it was that rooftops afforded views of other homes which resulted in minimal privacy, still others like Bailey (1990:89) claimed the following, 'In 2 Samuel 11.2-5, Bathsheba's bathing in a location which is observable from the palace may be viewed as part of an attempt at improving status.' This view is not popular among the majority of commentators, as it was a typical practice of the common folks to have conveniently taken quick bathings with minimal privacy; while still others perceived Bathsheba was taking a modest cleansing after her menstrual cycle. The ultimate guilt however rests upon David and his position of power as it was he (and not Bathsheba) who was the target of Nathan's sermon in 2 Samuel 12.

Being the most powerful man alive, David resided in a penthouse overlooking the entire Jerusalem, which had a commanding view of the more humble homes below. Thus while strolling about, David may have inadvertently caught sight of Bathsheba bathing. However, instead of exerting self-restraint by fleeing temptation, David pursued her aggressively (noted by the verbs in 2 Samuel 11:3-4, he *sent, inquired, sent* and *lay*). Are these not indicative of a man of power? David no doubt had the authority and power to send for people; yet, he used it inappropriately and abused it for his own indulgence.

Turning to David's target, we realize that Bathsheba is not a helpless and innocent victim. The bible does not indicate any humiliation and depression on the part of Bathsheba when she realizes that she is with child. Second Samuel 5 of the NIV notes, 'The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, "I am pregnant." Bathsheba seems more than eager that King David bears the consequence of his actions. Could Bathsheba have denied the King one might ask? Like Queen Vishati's (of Persia) disposition, had Bathsheba refused David's pursuit, it might have meant death.

In reading about David, it is indisputable that David was a man with abundant passion for God, as he was likely the only biblical character who loved and feared the Lord to the extent of total disclosure and full transparency before the Almighty. Never was David modest in expressing his passion and delight for God. In commenting on David's passionate nature, Evan's (2000:183) presents a balanced picture of him in that 'his passionate nature can equally be used for ill when the only motive is satisfying his own lust.' Other god-fearing men may have abided in God's commands like Moses, or walked and talked with God like Abraham, or did right in the eyes of God like Hezekiah or even initiated a religious revolution like Josiah; yet few loved and delighted in the Lord to the extent that reverence was synonymous with not the least reservation in his expression of love to his Creator as that displayed by David. The Psalms testify of a man who confided and expressed his adoration to God so disarmingly and with the least of concerns about appearing undignified. Second Samuel 6:16 (NIV) notes Michal's comment of her husband, 'And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart.'

David was fresh off the partial defeat of the Ammonites and likely on a pedestal when he committed his sinful act. Connected to insurmountable victories, David decided it was time for him to take a break. This could possibly have resulted from his arrogance, power or laziness, knowing that he had the discretion not to go to war and could sleep the day away.

Different authors place dissimilar premiums on their interpretation of tolerance in seeing David remain in Jerusalem when he should have been off at war with his men at Rabbah.

Yet the bone of contention remains with not going off to battle when David should have and as a consequence being in the wrong place at the wrong time. These omissions however may have merely been the tip of the iceberg of David's sinful act.

Never should David have undermined the importance of cultivating his holy inner sanctuary before the Almighty. The underpinning of David's freefall into sin did not erupt overnight; it was likely the culmination of gratification that rested on the spoils of one's triumph and victories to that of resting on the provider. Here was a man at the pinnacle of his life – one who knew no earthly boundaries or limits, yet one who failed to restrain himself and gave no accountability for his actions to anyone, least to his Creator.

In comparing David's power and his discretion to abuse such power to that of Uriah's lack of power, Evans (2000: 183) wisely asserts, 'David has been flaunting his power, assuming that he can obtain anything he wants. But he lacks the power to deprive Uriah of his integrity.' Possibly more tormenting than death itself is a man lacking in principle. David though 'anointed as protector of the covenant' (ibid: 183) disobeyed the commands of Deuteronomy 23:10-15 and 1 Sam. 21:4-5 of 'no sex while at war' when he suggested Uriah lay with his wife (with the intent to wipe clean David's vile act of infidelity). David's lazing around was irresponsible as is, without having to address the complications of his engaging in the despicable act of coveting his subordinate's wife. In contrast, David's subordinate, Uriah, who was likely oblivious to the conspiracy, not only acted courageously to defend his country but demonstrated honour and principle in refraining from enjoying his wife while still in battle.

IV. Scrutinizing and guarding one's life

Was David's actions (adultery and murder) something that occurred at the spur of a moment where everything prior was impeccable or were there forewarnings that such horrific incidents could occur? Did the devil suddenly creep up on David or was he lurking within the dark recesses of David's heart. According to Swindoll (1997: 181), 'David didn't fall suddenly; some chinks had already begun to form in his spiritual armor.'

The contrast of David's rise to power from that of oblivion as 'mere shepherd boy' not deserving even to be named among the nominees for the title of Kingship and then his rise to valiant Israelite victorious over Goliath and afterwards experiencing the vertigo effect and downward fall astonishes any onlooker.

Unlike Solomon, who was overt and conspicuous in his practice of possessing many wives, David's passion for God unfortunately translated into his passion for women, though his occupation of them was on a somewhat smaller scale and his desire for them escalated in a somewhat subtler manner. Though David had a minimal awareness of his consumption and passion for women, this indulgence was seeping into his life slowly. David had become desensitized to the fact that a number of his wives had been married, e.g. Abigail and Bathsheba, or remarried in the instance, like that of Michal; he somehow wielded a need to possess a harem. He was unable to guard against that expected of him from God – the king of Israel should refrain from possessing many wives.

David may have been experiencing a mid-life crisis. He was not where he should have been (at war) and his consciousness to refrain from sin was exceptionally low. Whether David had kept busy and had an afternoon siesta or whether David lazed through the day before getting up in the evening is rather controversial in the prelude to meeting Bathsheba. The crux rests on the partial defeat of the Ammonites served as a precursor to the likelihood of sin.

Many men rise to positions of power, honour and fame, yet hindsight from history reveals that empires fall as a consequence of man's insensitivity to polygamy and their lust for women. David was likewise vulnerable and not immune to this weakness, yet he ignored the warnings and left this aspect of his life unguarded. In a sense, it is rather appalling that a humble, obedient and god-fearing David was capable of committing the sins of adultery and murder (even pre-meditated). How could one as immaculate as David end up committing such heinous acts? As observed by Peterson (1999: 182), 'As with most sins, gradually and unobtrusively.' The warning must be heeded that if life were left unguarded, without any need

for accountability and continual awareness, the likelihood of falling into sin proportionally increases.

V. Considering the consequences before taking action

One may box off Second Samuel 11 as an isolated incidence of disobedience towards God. Yet the consequence of sin brings about tumultuous impact. David may not have contemplated the significance of his actions beforehand. The following repercussions resulted from David's actions: Uriah, one of his most loyal advisors and warriors died as did other innocent warriors fighting at the wall with him; the unborn child conceived out of wedlock with Bathsheba died; the sword would not depart from David's descendants and the nation and kingdom of Israel plunged into turmoil afterwards; and David's wives and concubines were raped in public by David's son Absalom. David's sin served as a catalyst and produced a domino effect as it propelled the nation of Israel into sin and severed its relationship with the Almighty God.

Everything that happened prior to David's act of adultery was that of victory. The events that followed were often of defeat. David's vulnerability to sin increased after his many victories on the battlefield. Unfortunately, David was unaware of it. This is a profound contrast to that of how uprightly David reacted when Goliath mocked his God. Yet, having exhibited such righteousness in his early years, David himself becomes blinded to his own sins, after having been blessed by God through the many conquests – obviously this is prior to Nathan's prompting. It is often in success that one should stand guard lest one falls.

In comparing with David's junior, integrity remained with Uriah and this took precedence over death. As noted by Petersen (1999: 182), 'Uriah's moral restraint is an implicit rebuke to David's immoral indulgence.' An imminent and compelling thought that runs through from the various readings and a thought-provoking statement made by Dr. Chow pertain to that of realizing that life does not end on earth. Eternity must be placed in its proper perspective. There's always the impending thought and point of contention that Uriah did not deserve death. In the one act where David failed, Uriah never flinched once. He had two chances to lay with his wife (which was only human for a married man), yet his noble and virtuous character obliged him to abstain and that brought about the consequence of death. Now, is such benevolence deserving of such a tragic end?

Humanly speaking, and on the level of temporal gratification, the decision Uriah made to withhold from sex was foolish and preposterous. Yet, the pre-eminence lies not in whether Uriah had the faintest idea of David's immoral act with his wife or the pretext of David's sending for him. For Uriah, life was more than being alive in body – evident is his ability to exert self-restraint.

Uriah was an exemplary soldier and had countless battles to fight, as did kings at that time, like that of King Josiah. Maybe such warriors knew of their susceptibility to death and were always ready to die for their country. Unlike the tranquility experienced in modern times by the majority of humans, these god-fearing men may have been brought up with the mentality to uphold the conviction that a life well-lived is one that exhibits valour and principle. The contention of dying for doing right hardly took precedence for men who were obedient to their Creator.

A one-night affair harms no one. That is the worldly message of temptation and sin. It was the saying of antiquity and this powerful statement still holds true in the 21st century. What's more, the desire to live rightly may sometimes bring about a tragic ending like that of Uriah - in being sent to hold defense in a post most susceptible to attack and death. Phillips (1999: 206) maintained, 'It happens all the time today, as those with competence and principles find themselves being dismissed for committing the gross crime of exposing the boss's lack of both.' This could not be further from the truth. Though Uriah had likely observed godly principles in David while he was a rank and file, it is hapless to acknowledge that tables have turned and it is now Uriah who is the man of principles and not the king himself. On reaching

the apex of one's career, there's often no place to move but downwards and that is what we should all guard against through constant reflection and accountability of one's life before a living God who will one day judge all men.

David's willingness to repent of his sinful acts at Nathan's rebuke in Second Samuel 12 and David's confession before God in Psalm 51 brings out another side of David's character. Though David has failed to abide to the command of loving the brother (Uriah) who stands before him, he has successfully achieved that of total outward human adoration, devotion and love towards his God. It is evident that David cannot and will not hide when convicted of his wrongdoings nor does he care the least of man's response of his predilection for candid outpouring of his heart before God. These latter displays in his character are virtues deserving of mention and admiration.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, David's sins which are exposed in Second Samuel 12 by Nathan can be viewed from two theological perspectives as to how David is perceived. Firstly, is this story one of judgment and condemnation or secondly, is the story to be taken as one of grace, restoration and hope? Sinners may see it as both and such sins should not to be viewed as far removed from men of the 21st century. The more one reads and searches however, the more one finds David's character controversial. Peterson (1999:183) notes that, '...virtually all sins ring changes on the theme of wanting to be gods ourselves, taking charge of our own lives and asserting control over the lives of others.'

Both in Dr. Philip Yeung's course and in this one, I've come to realize David as being quite human. He is less a larger than life picture and as noted in Dr. Chow's penetrating remark, each Israelite king must be considered individually, though it should not be obliterated that each king has his point worthy of appreciation. As observed by Phillips (1999: 202), '...the executive who allows the hand of power to brush aside all deliberation and critical analysis removes his own best defense against power itself.'

David's penchant for decisive action expedited and intensified his thirst for immediate gratification and indulgence, after having caught a glimpse of Bathsheba bathing through the verbs indicated in the bible, 'he *saw*, he *sent*, he *slept*' of his actions toward Bathsheba. The incident was rebuked by Phillips (1999:202) as follows, 'Rather than turn away, his eye lingers, his mind soaking up what rests before him.' The purpose behind this in-depth analysis of David serves not to exasperate and become infuriated and agitated with David's actions. Instead, his downfall should serve as a reminder that we as human beings are prone to similar temptations and frailties. With sin around the corner and the devil prowling, one has to be on guard and flee in the opposite direction.

Had David's cover-up of lie concealing lie been escorted by fear of being stoned to death were he convicted of adultery under Israelite law? Why was David allowing himself to plunge deeper and deeper into sin? Was he in oblivion of his sinful actions then? The gross negligence committed against the man Uriah was a transgression against David's devoted Heavenly Father. His actions bring to light the human side of David's so called 'impeccable' character. Nothing is closer to the truth than that stated by Phillips (1999) that 'Personal infidelity always leads to professional infidelity.'

This is where one's work ethics come to the forefront. If one is dishonest in private, how much more in public! David exuded a tendency of neglecting to consider the consequences before embarking on one's impulsive actions. This serves as a reminder to those working out one's faith with fear and trembling to maintain an alertness of one's victories (and even failures) and status when guarding one's life and giving careful thought to one's actions.

David's tragic encounter must not be an end in itself as Second Samuel 12 (where Nathan rebukes David) follows with the forgiveness story for the sin David committed, which parallels the salvation story of God's forgiveness of man.