

At A Glance

A sermon on 2 Samuel 11 by Rev. Heather Thomsen Tang

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This summer we've been learning about King David – a man whose life reflects that strange human mosaic of foolishness, fidelity, fear, faith and friendship. In much of our narrative so far, David has acted with valor and the courageous, generous spirit of a King. But today's chapter is the dark turning point in David's life. The interactions between David and Bathsheba are as tragic as they are graphic. As OT scholar Walter Brueggemann has so poignantly written, "This literature is an invitation to see behind... to discern what humanness is about when lived in the presence of earthly power that invites, seduces, and destroys. The impact of this literature, so ancient and so contemporary, is that it tells us how in fact it is with us. The narrative is more than we want to know about David, and more than we can bear to understand about ourselves." To put it bluntly, this story is hard for us to hear, not merely because of its tragedy, but because in it we catch glimpses of ourselves that we would rather not see. And yet, beneath its stark portrayal of humanity, there is something bigger, something deeper. Something that undergirds the story and its characters.

Here's a basic summary: The plot in 2 Samuel 11 hinges on a glance: from the roof of his palace, David's gaze falls upon a woman. At first glance, David notices two things -- she is beautiful, and she's bathing. Now, we need to understand "bathing" in two ways: 1) literally, she is cleansing herself; and 2) it means she is *n-a-k-e-d*, which in the south, I have come to understand, is pronounced "naked." A naked woman! This is the part in the movie when my mom would forcefully say to my sister and I, "girls, cover your eyes!" David's first glance at this bathing beauty led him to a swift and certain conclusion. He knew what he wanted. And he took it.

We, the readers, can also make a cursory glance over this story and jump to our own swift and certain conclusions. At a glance, this story seems to be about sexual sin, and therefore many sermons focus on the necessity of guarding your eyes from temptation in order to guard your hearts from lust and your bodies from sexual impurity. But there is something far more insidious at work in this story, and far more deadly. So let's move beyond our first glance at the story and David's first glance from the roof. It's time to pull back the curtain.

We first find David *remaining in Jerusalem* after sending Joab and all Israel to war. *Why does this matter?* Verse 1 picks up at the end of a battle discourse in chapter 10. Joab, David's military commander, and *all* the soldiers of Israel are on the dusty battle field, sent at David's command to kill their enemies, while David is at home killing time. This verse matters because it seems to reflect a change in David's leadership. Up to this point, David has always led the charge, recklessly abandoning his own interests and safety in order to lead his people in faithful obedience to God. But here, David stays home, enjoying the comforts of his palace, while sending his soldiers to fight for him. Before he ever tangles himself up with the woman, David has already begun walking a dangerous path away from what God has called him to do, namely, to protect God's people. This path leads instead only toward his own self-interest. *Who's interests are you pursuing right now? The interests of God's Kingdom? Or your own? How might you be sitting at home in Jerusalem instead of actively engaging in what the Lord has called you to do?*

The scene cuts to David pacing on his roof. At first glance, the location seems trivial. But the roof is mentioned twice, which should clue us in that the narrator is making a point. Unless you're afraid of heights, there is something alluring about being on a roof, especially of a tall building. Whenever we travel, Davin and I often spend an evening at a rooftop bar because we enjoy seeing the city from a different perspective. Our first date was to a rooftop bar in LA! Think about it: skyscrapers, tree houses, the tower of Babel – humans have a thing for putting ourselves in a position where we can look down on what is unfolding below us.

So here we find the commander in chief gazing over his kingdom, high above the homes of his people. Talk about a power trip! It is no wonder that the devil, according to Luke's Gospel, took Jesus to a high place and tempted Jesus with dominion over all the kingdoms of the world. This high vantage point, it seems, is a symbol for David's power, as it was for Jesus in his temptation. From the roof, David sees all and commands all. And as the reader sees next, King David thinks he can control anything he sees.

It is clear from the surrounding context that David knew this woman's family. Her husband, Uriah, and her father, Eliam, are listed in 2 Samuel 23 among David's honored warrior chiefs. Bathsheba's grandfather, Ahithophel, was one of David's wisest counselors. But that didn't stop David from acting on his desire. After all, he was the King. Could anything stop him? David sent for her, just like he sent Joab and the soldiers into battle to fight on his behalf. And note that it wasn't one courier this time, but multiple messengers. Why more than one? How difficult did David think it would be for one person to extend an invitation to the woman? Or perhaps David was anticipating the need for force. Maybe this was no invitation.

Let's pause here and jump over to Bathsheba's story line. In contrast to David, she has no power. Remember that women were regarded as hardly more than property in the ancient world. Have you ever wondered what Bathsheba was doing bathing in plain sight? I've sometimes heard Bathsheba described as a temptress or a seductress who tried to lure the king into sexual sin. But this is just simply bad interpretation! Bathsheba was not sunbathing in a skimpy bikini! If we slow down and read the text closely, we see that verse 4 tells us that Bathsheba was purifying herself after her monthly period. As Joyce G. Baldwin, principal of Trinity College, notes in her commentary on 2 Samuel, "in cleansing herself from her menstrual cycle, Bathsheba was observing the Lord's decrees in an effort to be pure and righteous in the sight of the Lord," as commanded in the holiness codes of Leviticus 15. In other words, David saw Bathsheba while she was purifying herself as part of the customs of the Torah. She was being obedient to God's law and demonstrating loyalty to God's covenant.

In his 2 Samuel commentary, Bill T. Arnold, OT professor at Asbury Theology Seminary, writes this:

"Occasionally someone suggests that Bathsheba is not entirely innocent, and that she must bear a portion of the guilt. But in this literary presentation, the blame is carefully and deliberately placed only on David, which should make dubious all such speculation about Bathsheba's motives." Opposite the King, who is overcome with desire, and the power that enables him to get anything he wants, stands Bathsheba, her purity and covenant-faithfulness in stark contrast to David's lust and infidelity.

Only once in this story, beyond her initial act of ritual cleansing, does Bathsheba act on her own initiative. Repeatedly we have seen David exercise his immense power through the act of sending: sending a message or messenger to control events toward his own desires. But the one action we see Bathsheba initiate, recorded in verse 5 as yet another act of message-sending, reveals the first crack in David's illusion of control: Bathsheba is pregnant.

Let's recap where we've been: we've seen how the first glance through this passage doesn't fully reveal the complexity of this narrative. We've seen how the thing that most allures David is not merely sexual temptation, but power – power which takes the form of staying home to enjoy the luxuries of a king rather than joining in battle with his troops; power which takes the form of his sexual advance on Bathsheba. And we've seen how Bathsheba is not complicit with David, but rather stands in contrast to his sin, acting in faithfulness to God's law. But David and Bathsheba aren't the only characters in this story.

There is also Uriah. At first glance, Uriah appears to be a side character – pitiable, certainly, but somewhat periphery. Upon careful reading, however, we realize that the narrator has given several clues about Uriah's significance. The first clue is his name – Uriah the *Hittite*. The Hittites were pagans – they worshipped other gods than Israel's God, YHWH. Somehow, Uriah the pagan Hittite found his way into the ranks of King David's inner circle and married an Israelite woman. And like his wife, Uriah was also sent for by the King. He is then spun into this sordid web by a desperate David keen to cover his tracks. If David can get Uriah to sleep with his wife, maybe the King's sin can be covered up.

Uriah the foreigner is surprisingly stubborn. Three times over, Uriah simply won't do what David wants. We see this in verse 11, when Uriah says: "The chest and Israel and Judah are all living in tents, and my master Joab and my master's troops are camping in the open field. How could I go home and eat, drink, and make love to my wife? I swear on your very life, I will not do that!"

At first glance, it's easy to focus on Uriah's refusal to do as David wants. But his rationale for why he refuses gives the reader more clues about the significance of Uriah's storyline. Uriah mentions a chest. This chest was no container of pirate booty or weapons. It is the ark of the covenant, the sacred dwelling place of Israel's God. In referring to the chest and using the language of "tent," Uriah is referring to the tabernacle – the portable tent that was the heart of Israel's worship. This is a stunning statement from a foreigner about the things that are most important to Israel and Israel's God. Uriah was clearly committed to YHWH, to his duty as a soldier of YHWH, and to YHWH's anointed King.

As Bill Arnold writes, "The great irony of our text is that this convert of foreign ancestry is more righteous than the Israelite king. He is a man of such character that he shuns any minor infraction of his duty as an Israelite soldier. Yet King David, the anointed one of YHWH, has abused his God-given power and attempts to manipulate a faithful and righteous servant in a desperate scam to save himself. A drunk Uriah is more pious than a sober David." Stunningly, as a foil for Israel's anointed King, it is Uriah the Hittite, the outsider, who reminds the reader what faithfulness to God is supposed to look like.

Page after page in the Bible describes outsiders – foreigners, refugees, those on the margins - as more discerning of the way of God than the Israelite insiders. In Scripture, the identity of the people of God seems to be determined not by external identity or affiliation, but by those who *know* God. Uriah the foreigner seems to know God in a way David has forgotten. Uriah's allegiance to the God of Israel trumps everything else, even his allegiance to God's appointed leader. We are wise to remember that there is a difference between allegiance to God's way and allegiance to a person who claims to represent God's way. Does your life reflect knowledge of and faithfulness to God above all other allegiances?

Now, if this were a movie, we would expect the plot to turn at this point in favor of good Uriah, the surprising foreigner, or in favor of victimized Bathsheba. And the story does indeed take a turn. It spirals more deeply into deceit and darkness, reminding us in uncomfortable ways of the powerful people in our own world who pull any strings or use any words – whether true or not – to get themselves off the hook. But, at this point in 2 Samuel 11, more cracks appear in David's veneer of control. So, once more he employs his immense power in a last-ditch effort to cover his tracks: once again, David sends. This time, he sends Uriah back to the battlefield, unwittingly carrying his own death sentence in a message to Joab. Joab doesn't bat an eye at David's cunning, cutthroat command.

This chapter reveals David falling away from God's intentions for him, pulled down by his own power. From verse 1, when he remained in Jerusalem while his army was at war, David has been drifting from the King God called him to be and has succumbed to the allure of his kingly position. David's integrity collapses under the weight of his immense power.

This is a grim warning about the abuse of power and the way it can devastate others. David's actions destroyed lives – not only those around him, but also his own. For the rest of 2 Samuel, David no longer lives and acts as the King God ordained him to be. As we will see in the coming chapters, he becomes apathetic, resigned, and passive. He fails to live according to His calling. His family is marked by dysfunction and death.

As you hear this story, how might the Holy Spirit be whispering about your own position of influence and authority? Is the power you possess shaped by your allegiance to Christ? In your job, how do you exercise power? With your family or friends? In the way you spend money? Are you willing to allow your power to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, who gave up his place at the right hand of God, and emptied himself for the sake of submitting to God's will?

As we arrive at the conclusion of this chapter, King David has abandoned his post leading the army, forcibly taken Bathsheba, and disposed of Uriah. And it seems that he has gotten away with it all. But there is one thing we haven't accounted for, one final perspective to consider. And that is God. God's perspective. God seems to have been absent while David runs amuck. But there's this little cliffhanger at the end, one final verse that reminds us that God was not absent after all: *What David did was evil in the Lord's eyes.*

This final verse reminds me of F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. In the novel, there is a billboard featuring giant, faded blue eyes rimmed by yellow spectacles. They just float there, never blinking, ever-present. The billboard's bespectacled eyes see all - even things the characters think they have covered up. The giant eyes are privy to scenes that are eerily similar to the events of 2 Samuel 11: an extra-marital affair, and a reckless death. The characters seem to feel the eyes watching them. And so too has God been watching the events of 2 Samuel 11: David's collapse under the weight of his own power, his abuse of Bathsheba, his manipulation of Uriah, Joab's complicity - God has seen it all. But unlike the passive billboard in the *Great Gatsby*, God doesn't just see, God acts. And this final verse gives us a glance into the direction the rest of the narrative will take. God is about to step into this destructive situation in a way that only God can. In this chapter, David has sent and sent and sent as an exercise of his kingly authority. But for all his power and cunning, he is about to be dwarfed by the Lord God, the King of Kings. For, at the beginning of the next chapter, it will be God who sends. God will send the prophet Nathan to confront David, thoroughly shattering his illusion of control. God, the true King, will send a message to exercise his own incomparable power, and remind David whose authority truly has staying power. God will send the prophet to convict David of his sin, leaving him no way out the mess he has made except through God's way.

What David did was wicked in the Lord's sight. Yes. But, to conclude, I will say this: it is not only wickedness that the Lord sees. If you recall our first sermon in this series, it was the same God in 1 Samuel 16 who chose this same David, the unassuming shepherd boy, to be Israel's King. God does not see the same way people see, 1 Samuel 16 reads. People look at the outside of a person, but the Lord looks at the heart.

It is precisely because God sees, because the Lord looks at the heart, that there is hope in the heaviness of this story. As God saw David, Bathsheba, Uriah and Joab, so God sees into the depths of your heart, and mine. If you, like Bathsheba or Uriah, find yourself in powerless situations, that realization may bring a great sense of comfort. God sees what you have endured. God knows. God cares. God's justice will come. But if you resonate more with David in this story, God's all-seeing gaze is a terrifying thing to ponder. But let us not forget that this is the same God who first looked into David's heart and saw Israel's future king - with all his victory, failure, and sin. No matter how far he falls, there is hope for David when he turns back to God. And the same is true for us today. No matter how much devastation you have caused, no matter how much devastation you have experienced, there still is and will always be hope for you when you turn back to God.