

2 Samuel 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Samuel chapter 11. In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah, but David remained at Jerusalem. It happened late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful, and David sent and inquired about the woman.

And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite? So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him and he lay with her. Now she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness. Then she returned to her house, and 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 was doing. And how the people were doing, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, Go down to your house and wash your feet. And Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the door 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, Have you not come from a journey?

Why did you not go down to your house? Uriah said to David, The ark and Israel and Judah dwell 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 this thing. Then David said to Uriah, Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back. So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next.

[1 : 5 0] And David invited him, and he ate in his presence and drank, so that he 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, that he may be struck down and die. And as Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant men. And the men of the city came out and fought with Joab, and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite also died.

Then Joab sent and told David all the news about the fighting, and he instructed the messenger, When you have finished telling all the news about the fighting to the king, then, if the king's anger rises, and if he says to you, Why did you go so near to the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall? Who killed Abimelech, the son of Jerubasheth? Did not a woman cast an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died at Thebes? Why did you go so near the wall?

Then you shall say, Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also. So the messenger went and came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell. The 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.

Then 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. David said to the messenger, Thus shall you say to Joab, Do not let this matter displease you, for the sword devours now one and now another.

Strengthen your attack against the city and overthrow it, and encourage him. When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she lamented over her husband. And when the morning 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. We've read the story of David's rise, and now in chapter 11 we reach the point of his catastrophic fall, a fall that will cast its ugly shadow over the rest of David's life. The story has its starting point in the war against the Ammonites. Joab and his men are besieging Rabbah. However, David has not gone out with the army, even though we have just been told that it was the time when kings go out to battle. The war with the Ammonites is important background to the story of chapters 11 and 12. It frames the entire narrative, which begins with David staying at home in Jerusalem while his army goes out to besiege Rabbah, and ends with the capture of Rabbah, now with David present, and David then returning to Jerusalem. In this chapter, the siege of Rabbah will be exploited by David as a means of covering up the murder of Uriah. The background of the battle heightens the irony, revealing just how cynical and evil David's sin was. David takes full advantage of the faithfulness, loyalty, and honesty of his servant Uriah in order to enact his callous betrayal and his act of predation. Rather than fighting for Israel with his men, David is staying at home and preying upon the wife of one of his closest servants. While there was nothing wrong in principle with David not going out to war, when his behaviour is seen against the backdrop of the war, and in contrast with the behaviour of the ill-fated Uriah, it is seen in its true ugliness.

[5 : 16] Peter Lightheart and others observe that the expression in the opening verse, typically translated when kings go out to battle, is in the Masoretic text, when messengers go out to battle. The word for messengers being extremely close to that of kings. This would highlight just how much of the chapter is about the sending of messengers to and fro, not only in the kingly business of war, but in assisting David in his act of adultery and murder. Indeed, even when messengers are going to and from the battle line, it is the business of the adultery and murder that is foremost in David's mind, not the proper business of the Ammonite war. David is lazing around in the late afternoon, lying on his couch. This detail is not strictly necessary to the scene, which might have begun with David on the roof of his palace. However, it helps to characterise David's state of excessive ease, which will contrast with Uriah's behaviour later in the passage. David sees a woman bathing from his roof. The king's palace was almost certainly on higher ground and a higher building than any of the other buildings around, so he was able to overlook other people's properties. According to many readings of the passage, Bathsheba was purifying herself from her presumably menstrual uncleanness, which suggests both that she was not pregnant and underlines the fact that she was acting as a righteous Israeliteess and was not inviting any male attention in her actions. After David sees the woman, the first act of several acts of sending in the chapter occurs. David sends and enquires about the woman. In the various acts of sending, David establishes an expanding web of complicity.

He is told that she is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. One of the important things to note here is that both her father and her husband were members of David's 30 mighty men, listed at the end of 2 Samuel chapter 23. These were not just ordinary Israelites.

These were some of David's chief and most loyal men. The top 30. They performed the most remarkable deeds of heroism and faithfulness for him. Uriah the Hittite is a Hittite. He is presumably not an Israelite, but a convert. His piety is pronounced in the rest of the chapter. Praying upon a regular Israelite would be bad enough. But David is preying upon one of Israel's great war heroes, upon a person whose loyalty to David and to the God of Israel was not merely a matter of honouring the loyalties of birth, but were the loyalties that he had assumed through choice. The baseness of David's act of treachery is more readily seen in the light of this fact. Indeed, Bathsheba's grandfather, the father of Eliam, was Ahithophel, one of David's closest advisors and counsellors. When Ahithophel a few chapters later joined the conspiracy of Absalom, and even more so when he counselled Absalom openly to sleep with his father's concubines that David had left behind in the palace, on the very same roof from which David had espied Ahithophel's own granddaughter Bathsheba, he was probably getting some personal revenge. David's actions here will have huge repercussions down the line. We should also consider all of this from Bathsheba's perspective. Here is the king, the most powerful man in the land, the man that her husband and her father fight for, the man whom her grandfather counsels, summoning her and wanting to lie with her. Not only is the power difference immense, she might also reasonably think that if she does not comply, David might take vengeance upon the people closest to her. She might also consider that, if she spoke out, she would be directly hurting people she loved, and undermining the entire cause to which they had dedicated their lives and service. Of course, David is the one responsible, but you can see why she would feel trapped. Having discovered Bathsheba's identity, David sends messengers to take her. There is a sort of fall taking place here too. David sees forbidden fruit, sees that it is pleasing to the eyes, and then takes it, bringing death and judgment upon himself. David to this point has, as it were, been established in the garden of the kingdom. God has shown immense goodness to him. However, now that he falls into sin, it will lead to bitter consequences. After lying with Bathsheba,

David sends her back to her house, but then she sends a message to David to declare that she is pregnant. We should be considering just how many messengers have already become privy to some part of this story. This would likely have been the gossip of the servants at this point, an open secret in the palace. At this point, David realises that his sin will likely become known, so he determines that he must get Uriah to lie with his wife, so that Uriah might perhaps think that the child, when it is born, is his. Under the guise of sending news about the war, David sends word to Joab to send him Uriah, who then sends him Uriah. After speaking with Uriah, David sends him to his home and sends a gift after him. However, Uriah did not go back to his house, and this was told to David. We should again consider just how many people are becoming complicit in David's sin here. Asked why he did not return to his house, Uriah gives an answer that highlighted David's detachment from his men in the war. Uriah is steadfastly loyal to the men, and even though his wife is just a short walk away, he is determined not to enjoy ease while the rest of the men are fighting. We should also consider the possibility that Uriah by this point has suspicions of his own. Perhaps he wondered why David has sent for him in particular, or why David was so eager to speak to him, yet seemingly relatively uninterested in the news that he bore. Perhaps he noticed some servants whispering to each other when they saw him in the hall. To heighten the irony, David swears by David's own life that he will not return to his house and lie with his wife, while Joab and David's army are camping in the open field. When David tries to get Uriah to lie with Bathsheba, he is trying to get him to break a vow that Uriah made on David's own life. That Uriah so values the life of the king also makes us think of how little the king values the life of Uriah. On the third day, after David had tried and failed to get Uriah to go back to Bathsheba by getting him drunk, David sends Uriah with a message to Joab. By this point, we've had over ten different acts of sending, message bearing or news bringing of various kinds. Uriah, however, is sent with his own death warrant. The tragedy of Uriah and the sinfulness of David is seen by the fact that Uriah will die precisely on account of his loyalty and by means of his faithfulness in bearing a message from his master. David is also making Joab most directly complicit in his sin.

Joab was the man of violence who had already proved his willingness to act in an immoral way for personal vengeance or political expediency. David knows all too well that in Joab he has a man who will get what he wants to have done done. David's plan is a really careless one. The plan would involve making a great many more people complicit in a way that could easily lead to its failure. David, the great military strategist, is becoming careless and sloppy and foolish on account of his sin. Like many others before and after him, in David, sin reduced a wise man to folly. According to David's plan, the men around Uriah would have to be in on the plan in order to draw back from him, presumably seeing its weakness, Joab doesn't follow David's plan. Rather, he determines to treat some other soldiers as collateral damage so that they die alongside Uriah in a place where the fighting is especially fierce.

[12 : 47] In murdering Uriah, David also murders a number of other nameless servants of his. Knowing that the military manoeuvre in which Uriah perished was quite unnecessary and obviously strategically flawed, David knows that David will be very angry about it, so he instructs the messenger to tell David that Uriah died in it, knowing that that would appease his anger. However, the messenger now probably has his own suspicions that the king and the commander of his army have conspired to assassinate an Israelite war hero. The extensive details given by Joab are also interesting, especially the reference to Abimelech. Abimelech was a murderous king who was killed by a woman in Judges chapter 9.

Perhaps Joab is making a veiled comment upon David's sin. David was now also a brother murdering king who risked having his head crushed by a woman. The messenger, however, seems to relay a somewhat different message from that which he was instructed to. In both the actions of Joab, which didn't directly follow the instructions that he was given, and Joab's messenger, who didn't give the precise message that he was sent to give, we see how David's sin has compromised the effectiveness of his rule.

The dishonour of his own actions end up feeding the dishonesty and even the treachery of his own servants. Through the betrayal and murder of Uriah, a profoundly faithful servant, David became more dependent upon and beholden to those of his servants who were most willing to be complicit in such an action, the very servants who would be most likely to betray him in their turn, as Joab later would.

Joab, knowing David's sin, now also had greater power over him and secured his own position, making it harder for David to purge his administration of Joab's poison, something he should have done long ago. David's response to the news of Uriah's death, especially when we contrast it to his response of the news of the deaths of people such as Saul and Jonathan, Abner or Ish-bosheth, displays a callous cynicism that might even make us retrospectively start to doubt his sincerity in those instances.

After the death of her husband Uriah, Bathsheba mourns him, and after her mourning is over, the coast is now clear and David takes her as his wife, and she bears him a son. It might seem as if David had gotten away with it, but the final words of the chapter alert us to the Lord's displeasure and prepare us for his judgment upon David that will follow. A question to consider. Reading this chapter, we can see David's initial sin of coveting his neighbour's wife gradually grow into ever greater sins and folly, and the slow spread of its rot into his power to rule, his judgment, the loyalty and faithfulness of his servants, his reputation among his people, and much more. The consequences of David's sin would only increase over time. How, after considering the growth of the sin and the spread of its rot, could David have arrested or avoided his sin? What steps could he have taken long before he stepped out on that roof, or after he saw Bathsheba, or at some subsequent point, that would have avoided the sin or prevented its growth?