

“What’s the Problem?”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

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If not Bathsheba, it would have been someone else. If not sex, something else.

2 Samuel 11:1-17

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The challenge of sex

Preaching on the story of David and Bathsheba is a challenge. What’s the problem? There are several, but let’s start with familiarity. Churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike know the infamously salacious details of the story. It’s always a challenge to preach on a biblical text everyone thinks they know well.

Second, the one night stand between David and Bathsheba raises the topic of sex, and that’s always a challenging topic for a sermon. Fortunately, I don’t have to spend much time today on the topic of sex, because my little book, *The Unity of Grace*, just became available to you this weekend. I don’t have anything to add to the topic of sexual ethics besides what’s in chapter 10.

The issue is not that I’m concerned about alienating or offending someone. I want to avoid two undesirable but common outcomes when a sermon touches on sex.

One is pride. What’s the problem with pride? Pride says, “I am glad I am not one of those sexual sinners like David and Bathsheba.

The second undesirable result of a sermon on this subject is shame. What’s the problem with shame? Shame leads to hiding, and that’s not what builds repentance, faith or community. We have to feel safe to unhide in order to grow closer to God and to one another.

The only direct reference to sex in 1 Samuel 11 is summarized in five words: “...and he slept with her.” No sensational details. So if that’s not the issue the narrator is conveying, what’s the problem? Let’s look at three problems that are easy to miss.

Success

“In the spring, at the times when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.” (2 Samuel 11:1)

The usual interpretation of verse 1 is that it’s about David’s slothfulness or dereliction of duty. I don’t agree that David would have avoided this if he had been with the troops. You can get into just as much trouble when you’re busy as when you’re not.

The main story of 2 Samuel 10-12 is not David and Bathsheba. Their tryst is an interlude in the story of a war that Israel fought against their neighbors to the east. The Ammonites people were distant cousins, descendants of Abraham’s nephew Lot. Back in Moses’ time, they wouldn’t let the Israelites pass through their land and allied with some of Israel’s enemies to attack Israel. More recently, Saul had defended Jabesh Gilead against the Ammonite king Nahash. Because David was Saul’s enemy, Nahash had shown David *kindness* – the same word used of David’s *kindness* to Mephibosheth.

When Nahash died, David sent a sympathy delegation to show his own *kindness* to the new Ammonite king, Nahash’s son Hanun. Hanun and his commanders, however, did not trust David’s motives. They humiliated David’s emissaries, shaving half their beards and cutting off their clothing just below the waist.

When the Ammonites realized then they had renewed hostility, they hired Arameans and others from surrounding tribes to fight them. David sent his general, Joab, to lead Israelite troops against these mercenaries. David did not go himself. Hired troops, however, only fight if they think they will win. Joab’s strength scared them. So the Ammonites recruited more Arameans from even further away. This time, David personally led the forces of Israel and routed the Arameans.

It’s only at this point that we come to 2 Samuel 11:1. The threat has once again been reduced, and David can delegate the war to Joab. If you read verse 1 carefully, the war is going well. Joab’s got this. David’s elite forces and his army “destroyed the Ammonites,” who no longer have allies. There’s just one holdout city, the capital, then known as Rabbah – today as Amman, Jordan. It’s going to take at least two years for the siege of Rabbah to succeed, and David’s not needed. The guys are just going to wait it out until they can starve the inhabitants or breach the wall.

This pattern of David delegating the fight to Joab and the army, then, is not new. It’s happened frequently in 2 Samuel. When David is needed, he goes. When he’s not, he can stay home. The problem is not dereliction or idleness.

David can nap when he wishes or enjoy the palace roof to isolate or entertain. David’s so good he has people – people to run the country, people to do his errands, people to fight his wars. He’s an amazing and successful leader.

What's the problem with success? Success entitles. One evening at the height of his success, David took a leisurely stroll on the roof of his new palace and saw a *very beautiful* woman taking a ritual bath. You may assume that means she wasn't wearing anything, but ritual baths don't require removing clothes.

He inquires about her and learns her name, Bathsheba, and learns she is the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. David knows both men. Our narrator waits until the end of 2 Samuel, 12 chapters later, to tell us that both Eliam and Uriah the Hittite were among thirty legendary warriors, called "mighty men." David personally knows her husband and her father. The rationalization of what he can do, even to his longtime friends, because all is well shocks us. Success entitles.

Success comes in all forms and at all levels. You don't have to be a king. Success may be handed to you or you go out and get it. You can buy a house, win a game, achieve a goal, find a job, get a good review, clean the house, publish a book, lead a project, land a sale or a compliment. Success is a problem because success entitles.

Power

"Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her" (4).

"So David sent this word to Joab: 'Send me Uriah the Hittite.' And Joab sent him to David" (7).

Success is not the only problem. David isn't just successful; he's powerful. It's one thing to send "someone" to find out about her. When he learns who she is, he sends "messengers" (plural) to get her. She's finished her ritual bath when there's a loud knock at the door. Multiple men are there while her husband is away and they say, "The king says to come with us." She doesn't seem to have a choice whether to comply.

We aren't told whether she had aspirations to join the harem, even whether she was a willing participant in the liaison. To put it bluntly, she's not all that important at this point in the story. Her name isn't even used after the initial inquiry – not again until after her second son is born. This is about David's fall not hers. She's an object for the powerful David.

She could not have been pregnant before David slept with her in a one-night stand, because she was purifying herself "from her monthly uncleanness." That was a weeklong process. A few weeks after the night in the palace she sends word to David: "I am pregnant."

This is a problem, but a man of power knows how to solve it. David sends a message to Joab. This is the second time Joab is mentioned in this chapter, but his name occurs 85 times in 2 Samuel. He is David's nephew, the son of David's sister.

He led the effort to invade and capture Jerusalem through the water supply. That's how he became David's leading military man. He's now on a mission to do the same with Rabbah. He is ferociously loyal, willing and ready to kill any threat to David's rule.

David sends a courier to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." Joab complies, and David chit chats with Uriah. "How are all the guys? How goes the siege? Hey, buddy, why don't you go home and wash up (wink, wink)?" As Uriah leaves, he is surprised to hear a voice behind him as he exits the palace. "Wait! The king sent you a present."

We don't know what the gift was, but it seems that it stopped Uriah from going home. Cologne? Flowers for his wife? Dark chocolate? Probably something suggestive. Whatever it was, David can give it because he's the king. He has power. On receipt of the gift, Uriah turns back to the palace and spends the night among the king's servants.

The next day David learns Uriah did not go home. "Hey, Bud," David says to him. "I heard you didn't go home. Why not? Dude, you just came from a battle. Don't you deserve time with the little lady?"

Uriah answers, "Everybody else is in a tent – the ark, the people, the warriors. They are all outdoors and vulnerable. How could I go home to a party and enjoy my wife?" The contrast of David's duplicity with Uriah's integrity is clear.

The man of power is not going to give up. He invites Uriah to his own evening meal and gets him drunk. That doesn't work either. David reaches a new low and sends a sealed message to Joab, carried by Uriah, that gives instructions for how Uriah is to die. The siege is still ongoing. Joab is to put Uriah on the front lines at Rabbah and then pull back suddenly, exposing Uriah to the strongest Ammonite defenders. The strategy works, and Uriah is killed. Worse, he's not the only one.

Power corrupts. David can't think straight. He loses his faith. He hasn't inquired of God for several chapters. He didn't even inquire when he wanted to build the temple. God intervened that time through Nathan the prophet. Power has destroyed David's integrity, even his reasoning. It has seared his conscience.

What's the problem? Power corrupts. You probably have more power than you realize. You have power if you're healthy and others are sick. You have power if you have money and others don't. You have power if you are well-established and others are new. You have power if you are a boss or a teacher or a parent or wear a badge or hold an office. You have power if you are physically attractive. Perhaps Bathsheba knew she had power over David. Maybe she didn't. But you do. And power corrupts.

Indulgence

"David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the LORD" (27).

Uriah is dead, but the story isn't over. Joab, David's general, has never been a particularly spiritual man himself. He loves success and he loves power. He doesn't see a problem. He colluded without ever pushing back.

Joab sends a messenger back to David with the news. "Tough day, King David." The Ammonites came out of the city and we fought them in the open field. We drove them back to the city, but the archers shot at us from the city wall. Some of the 'king's men' (that would be the elite fighters) died. Uriah was among them."

Joab knows David usually loses his cool with messages like this. David doesn't like to lose. He would usually blame not the fighters who died but the officers, Joab even. He would get furious and second guess the strategy. Not this time. David tells the messenger, "Tell Joab not to worry about it. You win some, you lose some."

Fast forward to the end of the chapter. Uriah's wife mourned her husband for the required seven days. There's no reason to suspect that she is insincere. Uriah was a good man. He was a soldier, and he died in battle. She doesn't know that David killed him. She doesn't know that her husband refused the opportunity to come home to her when he was in Jerusalem for two days.

She knows about the night she spent with David. She also knows she's going to bear David's child. After the required period of mourning, she is brought into the harem. David probably convinces himself he's doing the honorable thing.

Something has changed in David. Indulgence does that to you. He has indulged his desire on a whole new level. He already had at least 8 wives.

David's indulgence with Bathsheba attaches her to him and replaces his attachment with her father and brother, an attachment forged in the heat of battle.

Almost a year passes. Rabbah is still under siege. The plan worked. Or so David thinks.

Don't sensationalize "became his wife," as in a wedding ceremony with flowers and promises. David brought her into the harem. David generally lost interest in a pregnant woman. Life is moving on. This sin will all be forgotten. Indulgence deceives.

The Problem

The problem is so much deeper than sex. 2 Samuel 11 shows us how sin operates, how Satan operates. If it hadn't been Bathsheba, it would have been someone else. If it hadn't been sex, it would have been something else.

There's nothing wrong with success, power, or indulgence when channeled appropriately. There's nothing wrong with sex when channeled appropriately.

Success entitles. Power corrupts. Indulgence deceives. Sex connects.

What's the problem with sex? It connects whether or not it's right. That is its power. Genesis 2 says, "The two will become one flesh." This is a theme all the way into Paul's writings. "Why would you connect to a prostitute?"

It's about idolatry. Idols always seem innocent at first. But they displace God, displace priorities, displace everyone and everything except the idol – success, power, indulgence, sex. They falsely make us feel loved, safe, and satisfied. But they demand increasingly more. They promise far more than they can deliver.

And, almost always, the topic of idolatry easily results in either pride or shame. Both create distance from God and distance from others. God's wanting to draw us in – in to himself and into the community of his people where we can be safe to confess our idols, then find partners to forsake them.

We're going to leave this ugly story right here and pick it up next week.

Meanwhile, God's bigger than this story. This is not the end of the story. Rabbah will be defeated. The death of Uriah and others was a temporary setback. Ammon will be neutralized. That scene was ugly, but it's not the end.

The affair with Bathsheba was ugly, but it's not the end. God will redeem that story. Bathsheba will become the mother of Solomon and ancestor of Jesus. But not until David is confronted and comes to deep repentance. That's next week.

There is grace ahead, I promise. Amen.