

The Anatomy of a Fall

Date: 5 May 2024, 5th Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Everlasting Kingdom - 2 Samuel

Texts: 2 Samuel 11, James 1.13-15

Before there was Harvey Weinstein, Bill Clinton, JFK, and Henry VIII there was King David. The history of the world is full of powerful men using their position for sexual conquest. We've been studying 2 Samuel since Easter. Throughout the books of Samuel David has been the hero. God has given him victory over his enemies, and elevated him to the highest position as king over his people Israel. David has for the most part acted with the integrity and faithfulness we would hope for from "a man after God's own heart". But chapter 11 marks the great turning point in the story of Samuel. David fails spectacularly, and the consequences of his grave sin here spiral out into his family and the nation in the remaining chapters of the book.

We are given ringside seats to this unfolding drama as David indulges his temptation and then piles sin upon sin as he tries to cover up what he has done. The idea of sin is often out of fashion in our culture. We like to think that we're basically good people, apart from those monsters over there. But this chapter invites us to recognise how the same dynamics of temptation and transgression are at work in our own lives, in order that we might spot them at a distance and nip them in the bud; and so that when we do sin, we might keep short accounts with God and not try to hide or cover things up as that makes things so much worse. David's fall is followed by his being called to account in chapter 12 as he begins to face the consequences of what he has done. We'll look at David's grief and repentance next week, but this week is chapter 11 and the anatomy of a fall.

Have a read with me from verse 1.

In the spring, at the time 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.

Samuel has been about Israel looking for a king who will lead them and go before them and fight their battles.¹ This is what David has done, but the irony is that now, having been established as king, he remains in the palace, we imagine to do the admin of governing. He sends his general Joab out to lead the campaign instead of him. But it seems David hasn't been keeping himself busy, as in verse 2 we read,

¹ 1 Samuel 8.20

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. The customary noontime nap has turned into a lie in, and David wakes up bored and at a loose end. He heads up onto the roof of the palace and spies a woman bathing. I guess if this were today he would be idly surfing the net and some porn happens to pop up. We as readers know that David has a weakness for women. There's his first wife Micah, Saul's daughter. Then Abigail, Nabal's widow. There's Ahinoam of Jezreel. Back in chapter 5 we read that he took more wives and concubines after he settled in Jerusalem. He sees this woman bathing. She's very beautiful. He wants her. He sends someone to find out who she is.

The servant returns, literally saying, "Isn't she Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite?" It's a question because actually these 2 men are well known to David. In 2 Samuel 23 we read that Eliam was the son of Ahithophel, one of David's closest advisors. And both Eliam and Uriah were in David's bodyguard, his best 30 soldiers.² This would make Bathsheba a young woman, whereas David is a generation older. The question is an implicit warning, David should know who she is, the wife and daughter of 2 of his most trusted soldiers, he should leave her alone. But the snake of lust has wrapped its coils firmly around David. He wants her. He will have her. Strike one. Thou shall not covet anything that is thy neighbour's, including their wife. As James writes, "Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed."³

Uriah means "The Lord is my light". Although he's of foreign origins, he remains a shining light in this chapter. Whereas David takes what he wants because he has the power to do so as king. This is what Samuel warned Israel of back in chapter 8, that a king would take and take and take.

Verse 4. "Then David sent messengers to take her. She came to him and he slept with her." It's rapid, single minded action. No second thoughts. No reservations. David has slaked his lust. Strike two. Thou shalt not commit adultery. James again: "Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin."⁴ Uriah is away. No one needs to know. But before Bathsheba is sent home we're given an added piece of information. Bathsheba was taking the ritual bath required after her period, but that also makes clear that she could not be pregnant by her husband. But she has conceived, and she sends word to David, "I am pregnant."

² 2 Samuel 23.34, 39

³ James 1.14

⁴ James 1.15

Now just as an aside, the technological advent of the pill has radically changed how we view and treat sex. In the imagination of our culture the pill has broken the intrinsic link between sex and possibility of new life. Men have always wanted responsibility free sex. Free from responsibility either to the women involved or the nuisance of children. This is an instrumental view of sex, where the other person is reduced to an object there to gratify my desires. It dehumanises both parties. In 2022 feminist Louise Perry published a book entitled, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, informed by her work in a rape crisis centre. She writes,

The sexual revolution isn't only a story of women freed from the burdens of chastity and motherhood. It is also a story about the triumph of the playboy.

The new sexual culture isn't so much about the liberation of women, as so many feminists would have us believe, but the adaptation of women to the expectations of a familiar character: Don Juan, Casanova, or, more recently, Hugh Hefner.⁵

The reality of new life growing in the womb cuts through the lie of sexual freedom that reduces people to objects. It's a plea for David to take responsibility, to care for Bathsheba, for her unborn child. It's a question, what will you do? What you thought you did in secret actually has public consequences. It impacts other people and relationships.

"I am pregnant" is all Bathsheba says in this chapter. The impression in the chapter is that she is passive as others act upon her. Many contemporary commentators see this episode as a rape. After all David has all the cards, what can she do? I think the text is more ambiguous, but it does highlight that consent, while essential, is, as one writer puts it, "a precarious and hollow platform on which to build an entire sexual ethics."⁶ We need a more robust moral framework to protect people. Indeed this is what the MeToo movement has shown, that people can be harmed by sex that was technically consensual. Or put another way, if Bathsheba had been entirely willing and the episode had ended there would their tryst have been ok? To get to this point David has broken faith with multiple real people. And as the story unfolds we see how sin grows and multiplies.

Rather than face up to what he has done and confess, David tries to cover things up and keep his sin hidden. It's the fig leaf strategy we've been employing since the garden. But as the text shows it doesn't work. David sends word to Joab to send Uriah home. To keep up the

⁵

https://www.commonsense.news/p/im-30-the-sexual-revolution-shackled?utm_source=email&triedSigningIn=true

⁶ Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, Ignatius Press, 2022: 108

ruse he asks Uriah how the troops and the war is going. Then he sends him home, with a gift, maybe to cover his guilty conscience. But Uriah doesn't do what David wants. Instead he sleeps with the servants. Now, it's not as if only David and Bathsheba are the only ones who know about the affair. David has been ordering servants around to facilitate his adultery. As Uriah settles down to sleep, do they tell him what David has been up to?

In the morning David asks why Uriah didn't go home.

‘The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my commander Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!’

But of course that is just what David has done.

So David tries a second time, this time getting Uriah drunk. But again he refuses to go home. In an episode all about David getting his own way, the one thing he can't control is Uriah. As one commentator puts it, a drunk Uriah is more righteous than a sober king David.

Rather than own up to his sin, David will stop at *nothing* to cover up what he has done. He writes to Joab to arrange so that Uriah will die in battle. Strike three. Thou shalt not murder. Again from James: “And sin when it is full grown gives birth to death.”⁷ The text drips with horrible irony as David gives faithful Uriah his own death warrant to carry to Joab. Joab the strong man understands immediately what he's been asked to do. But David's letter was clumsy. To simply withdraw from Uriah in battle would be too transparent. Something more subtle is needed. He coldly sends Uriah and a squadron too close to the wall and so it is not only Uriah but now also his fellow soldiers who must die to cover up David's sin.

Joab sends a messenger back with instructions to anticipate the king's anger, and the postscript - “Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead.” But when the servant comes to David, he knows David has a habit of shooting the messenger. He's done it twice before. So he blurts out the whole thing. He clearly knows that the essential information is that Uriah has been killed. Who doesn't know about what David has done?

David's vapid response to Joab, “the sword devours one as well as another” is an implicit admission that Joab's adaptation of David's orders was necessary. Yes, I suppose many a good man had to die to cover up the murder.

⁷ James 1.15

The final verses emphasise the point. Instead of naming Bathsheba, we read, “When *Uriah's wife* heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him.” The plan has been executed, and so, after the 7 days of mourning, David sends for Bathsheba and takes her as his wife. It seems like the cover up is a success. No one will ever know. Apart from Joab, the messenger from the battlefield, all the palace servants, and who knows who else in the palace! But the chapter ends with one of the few explicit moral judgements in Samuel.

“But the thing David had done was evil in the eyes of the LORD.”

God is not fooled. He cannot be deceived. His eyes have seen David covet, and then commit adultery, and then lie, and then finally orchestrate the murder of Uriah, and other soldiers, all to cover up what he has done.

What are we to make of this text? First, God's Word is clearly and unambiguously aware of how men use their power to take women to satisfy their lusts. This is evil in his sight, no matter what they do to try and cover it up and evade responsibility. He sees. He knows. And he will hold those who do such things to account, as we'll see next week.

Second, I find it so instructive that James' description of how temptation pulls on our evil desires, which then lead to sin which then leads to death, how this so clearly describes what is going on for David. David's catastrophic sin here then is a case study that invites us to examine the dynamics of temptation and sin in our own lives. David's great temptation was lust, as it is for many men in particular. But the same dynamic is at work with the other things that tempt us - anger, greed, slander, envy, selfish ambition, whatever it is. Me and what I want are at the centre. Temptation so often comes when we're idle or tired. The warnings are clear, I shouldn't go there. But I ignore those and give reign to my misdirected desire which grows and swells and gives birth to fateful action. And then when we have done the wrong thing, how often do we try to cover things up, and in doing so add sin upon sin, so that the last thing was worse than the first. There's a destructive pull in sin. Poisoning relationships. Lashing out. Turned inward it becomes self loathing. Carried to the end, sin ends in spiritual death. We reap the consequences of rebelling against the God who gives us life.

In his terrific book, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis imagines a series of letters written by a senior devil Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood coaching him on how to tempt people to sin. It's a hilarious and incisive insight into the life of faith and human struggle with sin. At one point Screwtape writes:

It does not matter how small the sins are, provided their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is not better than

cards, if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.⁸

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.⁹

Being tempted is not sinful. Jesus himself was tempted! Sin comes when we give into temptation. The question for each of us is, will we take the way out when God provides it? So often temptation strikes when we're idle or bored or tired. What is the good we can turn our hands to? David could have gone downstairs. He could have listened when the servant said who Bathsheba was. Even after he'd committed adultery, he could have confessed, even confessed publicly. Yes it would have hurt his pride, but instead of suffering that self inflicted indignity he opts for murder to cover his shame. How much better for us to keep short accounts with God when we do sin?! Next week we'll see in Psalm 51 David's eventual confession. But for the moment, yes it crucifies our pride, but rather than to try and cover over sin with sin, how much better to turn to God in confession and repentance and so receive his full and free forgiveness in Christ?

I love the apostle John's words.

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. **6** If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.¹⁰

The darkness loses all power in the light. So let's be people who walk in God's light, and when we fall, let us bring our darkness into his light so that we might receive his forgiveness.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Fontana, 1948: 64-65

⁹ 1 Corinthians 10.13

¹⁰ 1 John 1.5-7