

KINGS CAN BE FOOLS

Scripture Reading: 2 Samuel 11:2-5, 14 & 15, NIV

The late afternoon breeze stirred the king out of his deep sleep. He had been under a lot of pressure lately. A confederation of enemies had tried to destroy Israel but had been badly defeated as God had advised them of a battle strategy. David's reign was now secure. His enemies were, for the most part, paying tribute to him. Only the Ammonites were left to offer resistance and their overthrow seemed certain. The Scriptures tell us,

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. (2 Sam. 11:1.)

Rabbah was the chief Ammonite city and a siege of such a stronghold took time and was tedious. Often the armies ate the growing crops around the city to help starve the population into submission.

For this reason some commentators don't blame David for staying in Jerusalem, while others believe he was derelict in his duty to lead his armies into battle.

Whatever the reason he remained in Jerusalem, David was enjoying the customary afternoon siesta of the East during the hottest part of the day. When the early evening coolness of the breeze woke him up, he took a walk on the palace roof which was at the highest point of the city. From that height he could easily look down into the private courtyards of the homes in the vicinity of the palace.

In the middle of his stroll he saw a woman bathing in the walled courtyard behind her house. David already had a large harem of his own, including several wives. Even though God had warned the Israelites that their kings should not take many wives, David had done so. In this respect he observed the custom of Eastern kings of his day. In fact the larger the harem and the more beautiful its inhabitants, the greater the splendor of the court.

David must have watched her for some time. She was very beautiful. Why she was bathing out in the courtyard, we do not know. It must have been obvious to her that she could be seen from certain points in the palace. Was she being immodest, seductive? Or just naive? The Bible indicates that she was bathing to cleanse herself ceremonially as the law indicated she should after her menstrual cycle.

David "inquired!" about her through some messengers in the palace. This too was usual for kings of ancient Near Eastern kingdoms. In Gen. 12:15, for example, we are told that when Abraham and Sarai went to Egypt the king of Egypt took her into his palace because he was so impressed with her beauty.

The woman's name is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, and she is married to Uriah the Hittite. (Uriah was one of David's most loyal and trusted soldiers and was one of the 30 valiant men mentioned in an earlier passage.)

While the Hittites were foreigners, many of them had apparently served with David in his campaign against Saul. In Uriah's name you will notice that the last syllable is *ya*, a Hebrew syllable related to the name of God. He either took the name himself when he converted to Judaism or his father may have

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given it to him if he had become a proselyte earlier.

One other detail is interesting: In the last part of II Samuel, Eliam, Bathsheba's father, is said to be the son of Ahithophel. If that is accurate, it would explain why Ahithophel, one of David's closest counselors, joined David's son Absalom in his rebellion. Even if David were the king, the shame David had brought to his granddaughter was more than he could take.

David sends for Bathsheba. (He may have reasoned there would be no harm in committing this action "just once.") Again, as was customary, no one would argue with the king's wishes. With their low status, women were completely subject to the king's will. There is no evidence of great passion on her part.

David sleeps with her and she gets pregnant. As we say, she is "in big trouble." The punishment for adultery is stoning. While in this case David is king and would not be punished, the same is not true for Bathsheba. If the king denied any involvement with her, what could she do? She sends word to David. Appropriately she throws the problem in his lap.

No doubt there were plenty of people in the palace who knew what had happened and the gossip was everywhere. But they would never publicly stand behind Bathsheba and embarrass the king.

Desiring to protect Bathsheba and himself, David orders General Joab to send Uriah the Hittite home on a furlough. He asks Uriah for a report on the progress of the war and when Uriah is finished, David tells him to "Go down to [his] house and wash [his] feet." (In the Hebrew, the word "feet" is the same as the word for genitals and may have been a soft command that Uriah go home and enjoy his wife. We aren't certain.)

Obviously if Uriah goes home to Bathsheba, her pregnancy and David's adultery will be hidden. After Uriah leaves the palace, David sends a gift to his home. When the messenger returns and tells David that Uriah has not gone home but has slept at the entrance to the palace with the servants, David is astonished. When he asks Uriah why he did not go home Uriah tells him,

The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord's men camped in open fields. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing! (2 Sam. 11:11, NIV.)

There is some indication in Scripture that it was taboo for soldiers on active duty to sleep with women, but this is not certain. In any case, Uriah's sense of duty and honor would not permit him to enjoy anything his men did not enjoy. What a contrast to the king who did not go into battle with his men but remained in Jerusalem to enjoy leisure and even the wife of one of the men out on the battlefield.

But David is not finished yet. He tells Uriah to stay one more day and invites him to a party. Using all of his skills, David manages to get Uriah drunk in the hope that his clouded brain will cause him to forget his sense of duty and he will go home. Even when he is drunk, Uriah has more character than David has when he is sober. He sleeps with the servants again.

King David is now panicky. His entire career has been based on his faithfulness to God, his selflessness. People love and trust him. He is perceived as kind and honest. What would everyone think if the truth were known? Why, Uriah himself might lead a revolt against his reign. David would do

anything to keep the love and trust of his people. He makes the same mistake as many leaders have done: He adopts the rationale that the "end alone justifies the means."

Uriah carries a message from David back to Joab. The message is his death warrant. He is to be put in the front line of attack at the fiercest point in the battle. He is then to be left there to fight alone, in hopes he will be killed.

Joab asks no questions. He does as he is told. Uriah is killed, but a number of others are also lost in the battle. They had to be sacrificed to insure Uriah's death.

Bathsheba is told and goes into a short period of mourning. When it was over she was brought to the palace and became David's wife. Rapid marriages after a husband's death were common in the East. Widows were virtually defenseless.

One can imagine the gossip in the palace now. "How convenient" that after the king sleeps with Uriah's wife and Uriah visits the palace, he is slain in battle.

From the human point of view, even with the gossip, it appears David has gotten away with adultery and murder. The writer, however, says at the end of chapter 11: "But the thing David had done displeased the Lord."

God sends Nathan the prophet, the one who had been so close to David as a spiritual counselor—almost the king's chaplain—to deliver a stern rebuke and warning.

Piety and godliness were declining in Israel because of their leader's sin. To deliver such a severe criticism, however, meant almost certain death for the prophet. In the wisdom of God, Nathan appeals to David as the judge, a role he occupies almost daily by virtue of his position.

Nathan tells the story of a poor shepherd whose one animal, a little ewe lamb, the family pet who had eaten from the table in the house, was taken by a wealthy shepherd and killed for food for one of his guests.

David is furious. He knows how that shepherd feels having been one himself. He demands to know where this cruel man is and declares he shall die for his heartlessness.

Nathan looks directly at David. Even before Nathan utters the words, David can tell by the anguished look in his eyes that Nathan knows all about his crimes. In the presence of the court, Nathan exclaims: "Thou art the man. Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes?" (NIV)

David is stunned. In the barest of whispers, his hands covering his face, he says, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Oh yes, he had sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba. Oh yes, he had sinned against the people of Israel. Oh yes, he had sinned against his other wives and his children. But he was most conscious of his sin against God. In spite of it all David was truly a spiritual man, a religious man, who even in his separation from God understood the true significance of his actions.

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David fully expects and believes he deserves the penalty of death from God. Nathan, however, reassures him. "The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.

David did not believe the modern, hedonistic, egoistic lie, "What I do is my business." He knew it was the Creator's business. He knew that the community was concerned about his sin and had legitimate claims on his decisions.

We are able to obtain forgiveness, yes. But we are also subject to judgment. Mercy, yes, but also accountability. We must also face the truth about ourselves and the pain we have caused by our evil. Forgiveness does not always strike out the consequences and it is important to remember that.

David's agony was bottomless. His conscience, once numbed, now revives with incredible sensitivity. Blessed in a mighty way by God, he had allowed himself to drift--drift away from God and toward belief in his own physical and spiritual invincibility. While winning battle after battle with the Syrians and the Ammonites, he was losing battle after battle with the powers of darkness. He took life's gifts and blessings for granted and wasted his powers.

It is believed that Psalm 51 is David's prayer of repentance for this sin. Remember, however, that these psalms were songs sung in public worship on many occasions. David wanted everyone to learn the bitter lesson he had learned, regardless of the humiliation. In his psalm he recalls his failures and God's graciousness.

David had truly repented. In his prayer he asks for more than forgiveness. He asks for purity, a purity that will go deeper and deeper the longer he lives.

This was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that a man's passion for a woman he should not have, proved to be an arrow of suffering for so many.

In an era when one does not have to be a ruler to have relationships with any number of members of the opposite sex, including those married to other people, David's experience is particularly relevant. We are accountable for our actions. Even now, if we are talking about adultery between married people, those who must pay the severest price, as in David's own experience, are the children. They not only lose respect for their parents and become more rebellious, they lose something of themselves. The values they thought were foundational to their relationships and to the relationships enjoyed by their parents, have crumbled.

All of those adults and children who have been through such a tragedy or who are going through it now must remember that the last word in the Bible is not the word of judgment but the word of forgiveness. There is always hope for anyone who will humble himself before God. The Lord's hand is not so short that it cannot save.

The Prophet Isaiah tells us that if we forsake our sin and return to the Lord, the Lord "will have mercy upon us; and he will abundantly pardon." He did it for a king who abused his powers by committing murder and adultery. Will he not do it also for you, "Oh ye of little faith"?