

Nathan Condemns David

2 Samuel 12

February 6, 2022

Today's scripture passage is part of a familiar story about David that starts in Chapter 11: "David and Bathsheba." The story is a classic, and has been told many times in many ways. The lesson book makes good points about the story. However, I'd like to add a bit of additional background. The main characters of the story are King David, the prophet Nathan, Bathsheba and her husband Uriah the Hittite, and Joab, the commander of David's army in the field. All of these people were connected even before the events starting in Chapter 11.

Nathan has been David's court prophet from some time earlier. He first appears when David has established himself in Jerusalem and has built a palace, and is thinking of building a temple for the LORD (II Samuel 7:1-2). Their association probably goes back earlier, but this is the first time Nathan is mentioned. Before David became King of Judah, it seems that the priest Abiathar was David's primary religious consultant (I Samuel 30:7). The point here is that by the time of our scripture lesson, Nathan is a trusted and loyal advisor to King David, as is well illustrated in II Samuel 7. Furthermore, David named one of his sons Nathan, the one listed just before Solomon in II Samuel 5:14. I don't think that was a chance coincidence.

When we read about Bathsheba in II Samuel 11, we often think of her as an unimportant nobody, except for her exceptional beauty, which catches David's eye. That's not the case. True, David doesn't know who she is, and has to ask. She is the daughter of Eliam, and the wife of Uriah. We usually gloss over Eliam. But he was important. He was one of "The Thirty," an elite group of David's men who went back to his days as a brigand leader being pursued by King Saul in the wilderness. Uriah the Hittite was another one of these loyal and elite followers of David (II Samuel 23:34, 39). Furthermore, Eliam is the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite, a member of the tribe of Judah, and an important and respected counselor of David. So, Bathsheba is well connected to a father and grandfather who are people of importance.

Joab, the commander of David's army, is an interesting character too. He is competent. That is clear in the accounts of his several battles. He is adept at using stratagems and deceptions for advantage. He has already incurred David's wrath

for having killed Abner, the commander of the enemy, Israel's, army, when Abner was trying to negotiate a settlement of the war (I Samuel 3.) Joab later would risk David's anger again when he killed David's rebellious son Absalom during his revolt. Then Joab told David to thank his army, and cease mourning for his son. David seems to have trusted Joab's military talent, and his loyalty. In II Samuel Chapter 10, and thereafter, David seems to have retired from being a commander in the field, and lets Joab conduct his campaigns. So, Joab is in a position of trust. But David has reasons to dislike him. Part of that is that David does not appreciate Joab's focus on expediency. Joab does whatever he needs to do, to achieve his purpose. So Joab is on somewhat shaky ground. We can see that in I Kings 2:5-6, when in David's last words, he tells Solomon what to do with Joab.

Finally, in our cast of characters, we come to Uriah the Hittite. The Hittites were a people who once had a great empire, centered in what is now modern-day Turkey, extending down into Canaan. So, Uriah is one of those "resident aliens" that we have been reading about. He is one of "The Thirty" of David's mighty warriors. He has likely been with David a long time. David has many loyal followers who are aliens. It seems that David was open to talent and support wherever he could find it. What we read of David seems to show that he was a man of character, who cared for his men, and his people. He inspired loyalty. One of my mother's favorite stories was about his three "mighty men" who retrieved water from the well at Bethlehem, where the Philistines were encamped. When David mentioned longing for it, they did that at the risk of their lives. David poured the water out, as an offering to God (II Samuel 23:13-17).

So, it seems so out of character, what David did in II Samuel 11. He saw Bathsheba bathing. His palace was on a high point in the city, and may have allowed him to look down and into the courtyards of houses further downslope. He found out who she was. She was a daughter of one of his elite "mighty men," married (probably recently) to another, Uriah, and grand-daughter of a trusted senior advisor, Ahithophel. David sent messengers to get her. She became pregnant. David tried to cover it up by letting Uriah return home. But Uriah, a man of character, who is loyal to David and his colleagues in the field, and does not take advantage of being near home. In desperation, David sent a letter to Joab asking for him to arrange that Uriah die in battle. Joab understands issues of expediency. David knows that. Joab can be "trusted" to do what David wants. He does just that. Uriah is killed. Joab is not new to underhanded methods, but David has made him complicit in this act of murder. Murder of as faithful a follower as might be

imagined. Joab will keep quiet. Too bad about Uriah. Things like that happen in war. Still, likely a lot of people still knew what had happened: messengers, some of the men in the field that witnessed the odd conduct of the battle, and those who David asked about Bathsheba at the beginning of it all. David would brazen it out.

That brings us to the scripture reading. Enter Nathan:

II Samuel 12 ¹ and the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. ² The rich man had very many flocks and herds; ³ but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴ Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.” ⁵ Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; ⁶ he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

⁷ Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; ⁸ I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. ⁹ Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰ Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. ¹¹ Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. ¹² For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.” ¹³ David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” Nathan said to David, “Now

the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child that is born to you shall die.” ¹⁵ Then Nathan went to his house. The LORD struck the child that Uriah’s wife bore to David, and it became very ill.

Nathan is an instrument of God’s justice. A terrible thing has been done to Uriah. It’s hard to know about Bathsheba. Later she shows herself to be a shrewd operator, but at this time she is a young and likely a new bride. Could she say “No.” to the king? That would have been very difficult. Yes, Nathan did. Joab did. But they had a history with David, and were experienced and in positions of power, albeit under David. They knew David well, and could guess how he would respond. Bathsheba was not acquainted with David at all; he had to ask who she was. So, I’m willing to assume Bathsheba innocent. She did benefit from this sorry affair, becoming the dominant queen and the mother of the heir. But, she lost her son, her first son by David, who died.

What we should not forget is how this drama would have played out in the reign of any other monarch of the times, even most of the kings of Israel and Judah. A Nathan walks into the throneroom and speaks a parable of injustice, and says, “You are the man!”

The king says, “Whose prophet are you? Don’t I pay you? Do you think I’m paying for your false allegations?” Turning to his Guard captain, “Get this guy out of here. You know what to do with him.”

Nathan had been a witness to David, and David’s character, for a long time. He knew that David had a sense of justice, even though David had violated it, and compounded the violation, in this instance. I believe that Nathan was confident that David would react the way he did. He was ready for that. When David admits his sin, Nathan is ready with a word of grace. David will not die. But there will be consequences.

How many other prophets were there, that we don’t read about, did something similar and were summarily executed? We don’t know, because they didn’t make it into the Bible. Elijah escaped after speaking to Ahab about Naboth’s vineyard, a comparable case. There were certainly cases of prophets being threatened. Here, with Nathan, the fundamental saving truth was David’s love of God and his

faithfulness. He was able to see, and admit, that he had done a grave injustice, and that being king did not put him above accountability to God. I think this, as well as so many other things about David's character, are what make him the great king that we acclaim. It was to David that the Jews would look back on when imagining the Messiah, he who would come and set things right. Jesus ultimately exceeded those expectations.

There were consequences. David lost people's faith in his trustworthiness and loyalty to his followers. There were problems in the family. Absalom killed the senior son Amnon over another case of unchecked sexual gratification. Then after a few years more, Absalom usurped the throne and seemed well on his way to displacing David. Those advisors who left David to support Absalom included Bathsheba's grandfather, Ahithophel. Had Absalom followed Ahithophel's advice, to pursue David immediately, the revolt might well have succeeded. In David's last days, there was a succession struggle for the throne, and Solomon, Bathsheba's subsequent son, killed son #4 to secure his position, as well as seeing to the end of Joab and others in the bloody mess that followed.

Yes, David was far from the perfect ideal of what a king should be, especially in this instance. But, he loved God, and recognized his sin when Nathan put the matter before him. David was not a typical king of the times. Remember, he was just a shepherd boy, a seventh son of a minor clan in Judah, when God chose David. Isn't it amazing how things work out? Someone like David, of humble birth, became the prototype for what people looked for as The Messiah.

God's grace was there for David, and for Nathan, and for even Bathsheba. Although he died, we as Christians would believe that God's grace would have been extended to Uriah, who would be there to greet David after his days on earth were accomplished. Joab? We can't know, but he certainly was faithful to David and David's interests, even though he had flaws of his own. God created many and greatly varied people in this world. It's a tapestry of infinite depth, and amazing. May we live lives trusting and loving God, and willing to live boldly for His sake, as Nathan did, and as did David himself.

Prayer: Good and gracious God, we thank you for the gift of people with the courage to speak out for what is right and the way they serve as guiding stars for us. When forces in life demand that we live up to greater responsibility, we ask for the strength to do what is needed and the wisdom to know what to do. Amen.