

Sermon Given by

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2 Samuel 11 - "Flesh and Blood"

We've reached a turning point this evening in our studies in the Life of David. You could argue that as Chapter 10 of 2 Samuel ends he is at the high water point of his life. Once the throne passed to David after the end finally came to the reign of his bitter enemy Saul, it has been a catalogue of successes.

I used to like those Bible trivia questions: I guess you know them all: Who was the first tennis player in the Bible? It was Joseph, because the book of Genesis says that he 'served with distinction in pharaoh's court'. Who was the first medic in the Bible? That's Moses – 'he went up and got the tablets from the Lord'. And one of those awful jokes is about David: Who was the first biker in the Bible. It's David – the Bible says 'the roar of his triumph was heard throughout the land'. That's what we have seen since David came to throne: the Philistines are defeated: but more than that: there is more to him than brute force and ignorance – because he has shown remarkable restraint in dealing with his enemies – kindness to Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel 9; compassion to an Ammonite king who was mourning the death of his father in 2 Samuel 10, which we looked at last week.

What a remarkable person he is, we might think... Chapter 10 ends with the Ammonites and even the Arameans in trouble; David is on the crest of a wave. And then it all goes wrong in chapter 11.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the journalist and former editor of Punch, was at a drinks party, and someone gossiping mentioned that a woman over in the corner had once slept with the writer H. G. Wells. Muggeridge wasn't shy, and he went over and started talking to her. And in the middle of the conversation, he said to her, 'Well, I gather you once had an affair with H. G. Wells. How did it happen?' That's quite a bold way to start a conversation! But she told him. She said, 'I met him at a party and we got talking. And after a little while he said, "Madam, shall we go upstairs and do something funny?"' Muggeridge asked her, 'And was it funny?' She replied, 'No, sir. It was not funny. That evening has caused me more misery than any other evening of my life.'

And I am sure that if we asked David he would say something similar: the events of this chapter caused him more misery than anything else in his life but much more than that – this had grim repercussions on Israel's history.

So despite David successes, we are forcibly reminded that **God's kingdom is not safe in human hands, even in David's hands.**

The question which the chapter poses for us is this: **who is really in control?** In a sense David has some power – he is the most powerful person in Jerusalem. But in all the events we had read he leaves one crucial figure out of his reckoning. It is surely deliberate that God is not mentioned in the chapter till the last verse. David forgot about him completely... with disastrous results.

It's a warning to us all, whether we are Christians or not, of the danger of thinking we are in control in God's world. We aren't. And we must live our lives in reference to him and his kingdom.

Let's split the story into four sections to see how that theme develops. In verses 1-5 the focus is on David and Bathsheba. Let me read those verses again. 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.***

² ***One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful,*** ³ ***and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?"*** ⁴ ***Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (She had purified herself from her uncleanness.) Then she went back home.*** ⁵ ***The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, "I am pregnant."***

That last sentence is the only thing Bathsheba says in the chapter. We are told nothing about what she thinks or feels about the events. We don't know whether she was a bored housewife or just plain ambitious, planning to bed the king and then sell her story to the News of the World.

The focus is on King David. He seems to be in complete control. He can take time off when lesser kings have to be out fighting their wars. His penthouse suite is higher up than most other people's – so he has the best view going of the city and alas a good view of Bathsheba on this particular evening. He has the intelligence services who can give him the information he needs on a random citizen, just like that.

She comes straight away and the rapid fire of the verbs in verse 4 tell you how quickly it all happened: ***Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her.***

Here is a king who can make things happen. It's a familiar thing today: sex without relationship – what Germaine Greer once shockingly called 'vaginal masturbation'. And David has the power to make it happen.

But of course he is not as powerful as we might think. He obviously isn't in complete control of his sex drive. Maybe his eye fell on her body by accident – and that was not sinful. Sexual attraction is not evil – far from it; but certainly once David discovered that the woman was already married he was culpable to take things further, even in his mind.

It's a similar situation often with pornography on the internet today. The tricky thing with porn for many people is that it's not as if you have to go looking for it. Pornographic material will come looking for you, without you trying to access it. It just lands in your inbox and asks to be opened.

The key question is what we do with it after the initial sighting. It's at that point it can become sinful for us.

The whole episode is a reminder for women, if I can be allowed to say this, that men are different from women when it comes to sexual arousal. Most men are more quickly aroused by what they see than women are. And Christian women help us when they take that into account by dressing modestly. Obviously we can't blame Bathsheba here for taking a bath, but David didn't have his sex drive under control.

There is a throwaway line in verse 4 that tells you Bathsheba is not pregnant (and could at this stage fall pregnant). David didn't have that situation under control either. And so it was that he heard those words that have turned plenty of other people's lives upside down before and since then. **"I am pregnant."** Suddenly David doesn't seem to be in control.

Well let's move on to the next relationship of the account, David and Uriah in verses 6-13. And once again we see that David is not in control of things. **⁶ So David sent this word to Joab: "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent him to David.**

⁷ When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going. ⁸ Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." So Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him. ⁹ But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master's servants and did not go down to his house.

¹⁰ When David was told, "Uriah did not go home," he asked him, "Haven't you just come from a distance? Why didn't you go home?"

¹¹ Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord's men are camped in the 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!"

¹² Then David said to him, "Stay here one more day, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. ¹³ At David's invitation, he ate and drank with him, and David made him drunk. But in the evening Uriah went out to sleep on his mat among his master's servants; he did not go home.

David finds he is not in control here because in Uriah he has come up against a remarkable man. Uriah was a Hittite, in other words not an Israelite by race, but a convert, which makes his integrity all the more striking.

David oozes charm and smarm at him: did you hear the deep interest in the war as David asks: 'tell me, friend, how is it all going on the front line?'

Then he offers him good service leave. But David hadn't reckoned on what happened next: Uriah refuses to go home and doesn't sleep with his wife so that the baby subsequently appears to be his. And the reason he won't go home is because of his loyalty to God's people and God's king.

¹¹ Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord's men are camped in the 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!"

He is the true Israelite and his answer should have jolted David's conscience awake.

Uriah's integrity is even more apparent when David gets him drunk the next evening and still he refuses to comply: Uriah has a greater loyalty to God and his people when he is drunk than David does when he is sober.

Let's not underestimate the cost of Uriah's loyalty – he held onto his integrity and he would have to give up his life to do so.

But David does not have the power to do just as he pleases, because in God's goodness he runs into a righteous person whose covenant loyalty holds David's sinful course in check. Maybe that is an encouragement to someone here that being godly does matter, even when others around us are living way below God's standards.

Alas, David wasn't frustrated for long. We're not going to look in detail at the third relationship in the story: David and Joab in verses 14-25. But here David is apparently in complete control. The account is bristling with irony. Uriah is forced to carry his own death warrant in a sealed envelope back to Joab on the front line of the war against the Ammonites. And the aim is clear: Uriah has to die. Never mind the other Israelites who die as collateral damage, it's a shocking way to repay Uriah's loyalty.

But perhaps we ought to pause. David resorts to a convenient form of murder to deal with the situation of an unwanted pregnancy. In our day the solution to unwanted pregnancy is an act of murder against the unborn child, an even more vulnerable victim. I think statistically that the UK has the highest abortion rate in Europe and the third highest world-wide. So we must beware pointing the finger at David as if he is the only one to behave this way.

But it is a grim example of David using all the machinery of office to make what he wants happen. David has no conscience about the loss of life he has caused – it's just part of the cost of war (or part of the cost of keeping his sex drive happy). He behaves as unscrupulously as any Middle Eastern Monarch – it's exactly what the prophet Samuel had said would happen when a king was appointed. But with Uriah out of the way, David appears to be in complete control of the situation.

And then there is the chilling epilogue to the chapter in verses 25-26. This is where the 4th and final relationship comes: **David's and God 25 When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. 27 After the time of mourning was over, 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.**

I was interested to discover that when Field Marshal Rommel was implicated in a plot against Hitler in the 2nd world war something not dissimilar was done to get rid of him. He was made to take poison... and then his wife was phoned and told a lie about him dying from a cerebral embolism – followed by a personal letter of condolence from the Fuehrer and a full state funeral. It was all a lie: Hitler arranged his death.

We might expect that sort of sham in Nazi Germany – but in Israel, from God's anointed king, surely not? Well yes – and I have no doubt that there was a cortege driving slowly through the appropriate Israelite town, a funeral in the national cemetery with full military honours, press releases praising his military record and fanning the Anti-Ammonite feelings and of course a letter to the widow.

But David has engineered what he needed: Uriah is out of the way, he can now marry Bathsheba and she bears him a child – the king is in control.

No doubt King David thought he had got away with it. OK, he'd broken at least four of the ten commandments: he had lied; he had coveted, he had committed adultery and murder.

But at least he hadn't broken the unofficial eleventh commandment: Thou shalt not get caught. And yet... **'The thing David had done displeased the Lord...'**

There is actually a subtle wordplay in that sentence because the language mirrors what David had said to Joab – ***don't let this thing displease yourself***. Don't be troubled by it – but God was troubled by it.

What a comfort it is after a chapter in which we see human sin in such bold colours, that verse 27 is not the last word on David. The Kingdom belongs to God not David. We all need to recognise that afresh tonight: we are not lords of our own destiny; he is. He must call the shots.

David's sin displeased God, it wasn't the last word: he was to deal with it in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, when he paid the penalty for all the broken commandments of God's people.

I don't know, but maybe there is someone here with something on their conscience which is as weighty David's sin. Well remember as we come to communion that our sin may defeat us, but it doesn't defeat God. If we are trusting in Jesus it has been paid for already. Thank God for that. And either we must face that punishment or Jesus has done so for us when he died.

There are some words of Martin Luther which out this very directly: Our most merciful Father, seeing us to be oppressed and overwhelmed with the curse of the law, and gripped by it that we could never be delivered from it by our won power, sent his only Son into the world and laid upon him all the sins of all men, saying: Be Peter that denier; Paul that persecutor, blasphemer and cruel oppressor; David that adulterer; that sinner which did eat the apple in Paradise; that thief which hanged upon the cross; and briefly, be the person which committed the sins of all men; see therefore that you pay and satisfy for the. And he did! What a relief that God has provided a way for David and us to be pardoned. Maybe someone here has something very weighty on their conscience tonight. It can be forgiven through Jesus Christ. But take note of this: If God takes the punishment of evil so seriously, then we had better take the practice of evil seriously as well. Instead of covering it up and wishing it away, facing it honestly and turning from it. And we are going to sing a song now which helps us to do that...

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(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)