

3: Bathsheba - one of life's survivors



The story in Scripture

Read: 2 Samuel 11:1 – 12:25

Starter

In your experience, how easy is it for small actions to have huge consequences – rather like the butterfly effect in chaos theory (e.g. a butterfly flapping its wings in New Mexico causes a hurricane in China!)

Key verse

‘One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman washing. The woman was very beautiful.’ (2 Samuel 11:2)

Background notes

Chapter 11 opens with the news that it is spring, that time of year when kings go off to war, but then informs us that David stayed in Jerusalem, having dispatched his army under the command of Joab. Conflicts were often left as unfinished business until the end of the grain harvest, around April or May, as many men were farmers as well as soldiers and needed to work around the agricultural year.

Perhaps David ought to have been out there with his troops, and then would have at least avoided the temptation to sin, but with the battle only 40 miles or so from Jerusalem, perhaps he considered himself close enough to control it from home.

Bathsheba was possibly a daughter of Eliam, one of David's "thirty", the mighty warriors of 2 Samuel 23, and Eliam was the son of Ahitophel from Gilon, a settlement in the north of Israel, one of David's chief advisors. So, this meant that she was from David's own tribe and the granddaughter of one of David's closest advisors (2 Sam.15:12).

Question 1: Often, the Old Testament can be dismissed as being more fiction than actual history. When you read a story such as this one, how does it seem to you - fact, fiction or a bit of both?

Who's to blame?

There's a famous saying that 'it takes two to tango', and we are almost left to make up our own minds as to who is to blame for the consequences of David having sex with another man's wife. Bathsheba, home alone and with her husband Uriah away on army duties, is washing herself in full view of the palace rooftop, but there is no indication that she was openly inviting men's glances, houses simply didn't have bathrooms as we know them. With it being evening it is likely that she thought herself unseen. It was probably a ritual bath following menstruation (Leviticus 15).

But she is seen by the king, and summoned to sleep with him.

In her defence, Bathsheba could not help being beautiful, and it was the king making the request, so a refusal might have had severe consequences as his word was law. But there is also no indication in the story that she protested when the messengers delivered David's request (we are just told 'she went'), so perhaps although young, Bathsheba was an ambitious woman prepared to take a risk.

There's also a rather strange conversation between David and Uriah where the soldier refuses to go home to the company of his beautiful wife on several occasions which, it has been suggested, might indicate that all was not well with this marriage, but that is pure speculation.

David has little by way of defence because he had been told that this woman was the wife of one of his soldiers, and his folly is exposed rather cleverly by Nathan, who we are told was sent to David by God (2 Samuel 12:1ff). David shows repentance later, but not before he has done all he can to cover his tracks and protect himself from ridicule.

Question 2: It is sometimes said of a victim that they just happened to be in the 'wrong place at the wrong time'. David was not a victim, but maybe he should have been out with his troops and not at home looking across to the rooftop where Bathsheba was bathing. The converse is being in the 'right place at the right time'. Can you relate to either?

Question 3: So, based on the evidence of the text is it possible to apportion blame for the incident between David and Bathsheba taking place?

Question 4: Do you see Bathsheba as a victim in this story?

Consequences – The plot



Uriah summoned to David, C16th tapestry

Bathsheba was not the first or last to become pregnant after a brief liaison with another man, but it leaves David with a dilemma, which he believes can be quickly overcome by fetching Uriah home for a night or two on an innocent sounding pretext.

David knows that a soldier who's been away from his wife for any length of time will want to be with her, and likely or not re-consummate his marriage – which would suit David's purpose. But Uriah is not playing the game and will not go home, so David has to revert to Plan B, which is to ensure that Uriah dies in battle and he does not get blamed.

Question 5: Bathsheba's husband showed great loyalty to David by refusing to go home and have sex with his wife while his comrades were camped on a battlefield, behaviour which ultimately cost him his life. We hear later of misfortune visiting David as punishment for his sin, but why do you think God continued to work with David, considering his behaviour?

Consequences – The aftermath

The initial consequence of David's action is that Bathsheba becomes a widow, and there is no indication that she was anything other than distraught, entering the period of mourning that was a part of her culture.

Several other soldiers lost their lives in battle in order that Uriah should meet his fate (2 Samuel 11:17)

But it didn't end there, as Nathan brings God's judgement upon David for his sin (2 Samuel 12:11-19) which will result in the death of the child conceived on that fateful night. Later, we read of David's son Absalom demonstrating his rebellious nature with his father's wives and concubines (2 Samuel 16:20-22), a dreadful act in itself but purely a political statement to the nation, and which also seems to fulfil Nathan's prophecy to David.

Question 6: What do you think of Nathan's communication skills in 2 Samuel 12:1-4.

Question 7: How important was David's public show of repentance, and are we all sometimes guilty of doing wrong and hoping God was looking the other way?

Restoration and blessing

David does acknowledge his sin and show repentance. He takes Bathsheba as one of his wives and they have another son who they call Solomon, which means 'Beloved of the Lord'. The importance of this blessing from God is that Bathsheba is included in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:6).

Bathsheba goes on to reveal herself to be as wise and influential as she was beautiful, bringing up Solomon with godly diligence and care. Later, in being the principal writer of Proverbs,

Solomon would write, 'Train up a child in the way he should go.' (Proverbs 22:6). Despite being part of a polygamous marriage, she had considerable influence over David's actions, particularly in the succession of Solomon as king, just as the situation for her and her son was looking precarious (1 Kings 1:1-37). She later used her position and influence as Queen mother to persuade Solomon that Abishag, who cared for David in his last days, be given in marriage to Adonijah, the son of Haggith, one of David's other wives.

Question 8: David and Bathsheba lose their first child in tragic circumstances, despite David's prayer (2 Samuel 12:16-24). What does this passage say to you about David, Bathsheba and their relationship with God?

Question 9: We know little of Bathsheba's life within David's household until in 1 Kings Chapter 1 we see how persuasive she can be with an ageing and frail David in order to assure the role of King passes to Solomon and not to Adonijah (another of David's sons to a wife called Haggith), and later when she uses the same skills to effect with her son Solomon. Bearing this, and the previous passages in mind, how would you sum up the character of Bathsheba?

Question 10: Does this story tell us anything about our own lives within the kingdom of God?

Quotable quotes

If you have time at the end of the study, you might like to think about one or two of these quotes on strength and wisdom:

'No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path.'
(Buddha)

'Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.'
(Mahatma Gandhi)

'Sometimes the strength of motherhood is greater than natural laws.'
(Barbara Kingsolver)

Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory.
(William Barclay)

'We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future.'
(George Bernard Shaw)