

Early this spring after the weather warmed up, I tried to remove a pesky spider at our kitchen door. At first, the spider insisted on building a web on the upper frame of our side door. Every time I stepped out to take the dog for his morning walk (and my walk) I ran smack into the spider web, wiping my face and hair to get it off. That happened for a few days, but finally, the spider gave up on the kitchen doorway and moved to our garage below. I disturbed the web less, but still probably once a week, I found myself wiping my face and hair to get the sticky spider web off. At long last, the spider gave up on that location too. She moved to the outside of the garage door. Either we’ve had a lot of spiders at our house this season or this one was especially determined.

The image of a spider web is apt for this sermon on David’s infamous sin. For David, one sin led to a web of deceit and then more sin, and it created a web of sin that lasted for generations in his family. Some have said that these sermons on David are really “teaching sermons,” and I think that’s an accurate statement. Today’s sermon is really the first part of a two-part sermon because next week we will read about the prophet Nathan confronting David over his sin, and David’s famous repentance that we can read in the 51st Psalm.

But today we hear about *a tragic flaw* of King David. For the ancient Greeks their favorite kind of literature seemed to be a story where the hero has a tragic flaw, usually resulting from their arrogance or pride. Greek tragedies were very popular forms of literature in ancient times. Aristotle was one of the first to describe *a tragic flaw* in the protagonist of a Greek tragedy which brings the protagonist to ruin. It was often a king or another powerful leader who was highly successful in almost every way, but there was something about them that was their tragic flaw and which led to their downfall.

It’s interesting that people get enjoyment from watching tragedies. I think there may be several reasons why. Sometimes we enjoy watching tragic stories because we can learn from them. That is certainly the reason this kind of story is included in the Bible. Quite frankly, this is an embarrassing story. It’s not the kind of story that I want to deal with on a Sunday morning in polite company. We don’t really want to talk about some of the things that are told in this story.

So, let’s admit some people enjoy tragedies for the wrong reason. Sometimes they enjoy the destruction of other people. I can remember a news story from Arkansas when the governor was indicted. One lady said with glee, “I’m glad! I hope they send him to prison forever!” I was shocked by that attitude toward the tragedy of another person. Sometimes I think we enjoy watching someone else fail, glad it’s not us. But that is not the reason this story is in the Bible.

This story is here that we might see ourselves in David, and see the same kind of tendencies in us. The New Testament ethic of Jesus and the Apostles can be summarized in two words: Examine yourself. We should not *enjoy* this story, but we should *learn* from it. It’s remarkable that the Bible has such a tragic story, especially about someone as well respected as King David. But the story is told with unflinching truth, making no excuses and holding none of the sordid details back. David, in the space of fifteen verses, breaks at least three of the Ten Commandments in a cold and calculated fashion: You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife; You shall not commit adultery; and You shall not murder.

The Bible makes no attempt to put a spin on David's sin. There are no flimsy excuses given. Certainly this story is told so we might see ourselves and learn from David's mistake. The passage begins with an introductory verse that places David at home while his army lays siege to Rabbah. Verse one says, *"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."*

This is a story set in the context of the violence of war. I suppose then we shouldn't be surprised to find a story of sexual violence in that sort of setting. But why is David at home? His army is laying siege, while David lounges at home. Perhaps David lost interest in leading armies into battle. They said that David *"had killed his ten thousands,"* so maybe he is weary of warfare. Or some have suggested that he is too valuable as king to go on such campaigns.

But I suspect that David was waiting for the final breakthrough of the city. Sieges like this could take months and even years to break down the defenses of a city. During that time, there really wasn't much to do. Perhaps the soldiers were digging trenches, building ladders, or preparing a battering ram. But there was plenty of time for the king to go home and wait for the final push.

David proves the old saying true, "An idle mind is the Devil's workshop." As David paces on the rooftop, he spies a beautiful woman at her bath. Verse 2 describes it this way, *"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..."*

At this point, David had not sinned. But then he decided to put his foot on a slippery slope. He gets entangled in this spider web, so to speak. Verse 3 says, *"David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, 'She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.'"* I think it's a very important part of this story that David did not know who this woman was. He had no previous relationship with her. There were no genuine emotions that he had toward her. He did not love her, or care for her, or wonder what she might think about him. But he did have power. He was the king.

Back in 1 Samuel 8, in the story of Israel demanding a king, the prophet Samuel warns, *"This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots...He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers."* The key phrase is, *"He will take."* So David decides to take Bathsheba. Verse 4 says, *"Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her...Then she went back home."* Scholars argue that the verse which says, *"David sent messengers to get her,"* should be translated, *"David sent messengers to take her."* There's no mention of motivations, emotions, or personal feelings.

The question that comes to mind is, "What about beautiful Bathsheba?" There were two people involved in this episode. Why is Bathsheba never held responsible for this action? The Bible very clearly places all of the moral responsibility on David. This has led to people speculating about Bathsheba. In the 1985 film, *King David*, we find a suggested justification. Bathsheba reveals to a shocked David that Uriah is an abusive husband, thus giving David a noble motive for the act of murder and the rescue of an abused woman (The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume II). But look at the Scripture! The Bible does not involve

this woman at all in David's decision. This is no love story; not a relationship. David has to ask to find out this woman's name.

It may shock you, but this was not adultery. This is rape. It was abuse of the position and power of the king. Bathsheba had no choice in the matter. It was coercion, plain and simple. There was no way on earth she could refuse and he was not the kind of man who would take "No" for an answer. David exercised the power of his position to satisfy his lust for a strange and beautiful woman. Bathsheba did not bear responsibility for this action. Only David is held accountable. In reading the Bible we can come to no other conclusion.

But this story of royal lust gets suddenly complicated in verse 5, "*The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, 'I am pregnant.'*" These words propel the story in a new and tragic direction. David launches a cover-up. David intends to get Uriah to sleep with his wife so that he might appear to be the child's father. Verse 6 says, "*So David sent this word to Joab: 'Send me Uriah the Hittite.' And Joab sent him to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, 'Go down to your house and wash your feet.'*" David's euphemism "wash your feet" was clear to Uriah. He knew that David wanted him to go down to his wife and have relations with her. But Uriah's sense of solidarity with those facing hardship in battle kept him from enjoying even a night with his wife.

The next day, David learns that Uriah did not go to his house. In verse 10, *Uriah said to David, "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!"* Uriah is a man of integrity, so David attempts to undermine Uriah's resolve through a drunken palace feast. But Uriah still does not go home. We can't help but notice that Uriah, the man of real integrity, who has been away fighting the king's battles, will not betray his comrades in arms. In desperation, David determines to murder Uriah in battle, where the murder can be disguised as a battle casualty. Isn't it chilling how easily the cover up plan shifts to a murder plot? The sad irony is that Uriah carries the order for his own death from David to his commander Joab.

In fourteen verses, the bitter story is told. We know the facts. Not until next week do we hear Nathan confront David with his sin and see the long-term consequences. However, we can learn a lesson or two from this story today. We can see the slippery slope of sin, or the spider web of sin. The more he twisted and turned in the web, the more entangled David became.

This story began with a look, then lust, then adulterous thoughts, then rape, then deception, then cover-up, and finally murder. At any point, David could have stopped this story and minimized the damage done. But no, he slid all the way to murder. Perhaps David fell into the trap of wondering how his actions could be so wrong if they felt so right. He was king. It was what he wanted to do. And it might have been not much of a story until things got out of control. He couldn't control Bathsheba's pregnancy, even though he was king. And it turned out that he couldn't control Uriah's behavior, even though he was king. Matters out of his control spiraled into worse and worse sins.

Which brings up what I would call the "gateway" problem of sin. David's lust or boredom turns into sexual sin, which turns into deceit, which turns into murder. He spiraled steadily downward on a tragic

path that will include more episodes of rape, murder, and rebellion. David's story is told with great frankness and nothing is sugar-coated. This story comes as a warning to us all. There but for the grace of God, go I....