CHAPTER EXCERPT

Bathsheba's Story: Surviving Abuse and Loss

David E. Garland
Dean, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University

Diana R. Garland
Dean, School of Social Work, Baylor University

Reprinted with permission, Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2007.

**Unless otherwise noted, all scripture is taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 1989.*

Photos by Melissa Jackson

This excerpt from Flawed Families of the Bible: How God's Grace Works through Imperfect Relationships *looks again at the story of Bathsheba and David, exploring the dynamics of abuse of power, survival, and God's working through even the most troubled and troubling family dynamics* (2 Samuel 11:1-4a*).

Military exploits had garnered David great success. After a long struggle with Saul, David had finally become king, and now he could take it easy. The way the Bible states it leads the reader to think David may have grown soft and accustomed to the comforts of home rather than the rigors of battle: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem" (2 Samuel 11:1). The assumption behind this notice is that kings make war and they do so in the spring. David seemed to have lost his fighting edge. He was no longer the lion-hearted military adventurer of derring-do whose strong arm had vanquished Goliath and who had later presented King Saul with a string of Philistine foreskins as the bride price for Michal. David sent his troops off to do battle and stayed home, becoming an armchair general, lolling about on his roof enjoying the breeze, and, it seems, the scenery below. Spring is also the time when, proverbially, sexual passion rises.

From his rooftop vista, David spied a beautiful woman bathing. Artists and interpreters over the centuries have turned this particular woman into a painted sex kitten who bewitched a divinely chosen king. They accuse her of deliberately choosing to bathe in a place where she knew she could be seen by the king. They imagine her coquettishly parading around naked to catch the king's eye. As a consequence of this portrayal of the scene, David

seems almost a helpless victim in the sights of a conniving vixen determined to seduce him. Since David is identified as a man after the Lord's "own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), God's chosen one ("the Lord was with him," 1 Samuel 18:14), it is hard to imagine that he could sin without some tantalizing temptress making him do it. We need someone to blame for our hero's fall. Artists and movies have therefore contorted the biblical story, leading us to believe that David was dazzled by a gold-digging, bathing belle intent on arousing his desire so as to ensnare him.

The 1951 movie David and Bathsheba is such a portrayal. David, played by Gregory Peck, confesses to Bathsheba, played by Susan Hayward, how much he desires her. He scoffs at how stupid her husband Uriah is to prefer the stink of battle to the intoxicating perfume of his beautiful wife. He huffs, "He has no blood, no heart." Otherwise, David implies, Uriah would desire her as much as he does and would want to spend every moment he could with her – instead of only six days in the last seven months. David then warns Bathsheba that he would like to ravish her like a king who can take whatever he wants: "Be thankful that I'm not Pharaoh. At least I can console myself with the thought that your modesty matches your beauty."

Bathsheba responds coyly: "Perhaps you would prefer truth to modesty, sire. Before you went away, I used to watch you every evening as you walked on your terrace. Always at the same hour, always alone. Today I heard you had returned."

David: "And you knew that I . . . ."

Bathsheba: "You'd be on your terrace tonight? Yes. I had heard that never had the king found a woman to please him. I dared to hope I might be that woman."

David: "Why are you telling me this now? Why not before?"

Bathsheba: "Because, first I had to know what was in your heart. If the law of Moses is to be broken, David, let us break it in full understanding of what we want from each other." (Gunn, 1996, p. 98).

Taking remarkable license with the story, the screen writers changed Bathsheba from the one who is ogled by David into David's stalker. She is the femme fatale who initiates things, knowing full well what she wants and what the consequences will be. She takes the role of Satan: "Let's break the law of Moses, and let's do it with gusto." The result of this portrayal is that David appears to be victimized by a cunning woman and is hardly responsible for what happened. Who wants to see Gregory Peck as a sexual predator? He is bewitched by an enchantress and betrayed by his own male virility and Uriah's lack of virility.

It is simply male fantasy to think that women are being seductive when they are in fact being exploited (Rutter, 1989, p. 69). It is not surprising, then, that the movie David and Bathsheba, written, directed and produced by males, makes the cinematic Bathsheba conform to male fantasies about women. A steamy seductress enticing a king with her feminine charms sells movies, but the text does not support this reading. For example, it does not mention how she is bathing. She is not taking a bubble bath or lounging in a hot tub. The law required ritual washing at the conclusion of her menstrual period. A woman would be highly unlikely to conduct such a cleansing from her menstrual period as a come-on. If she were in public view, she would have washed without disrobing. There is no reason even to assume that she was naked. Public nudity was not acceptable in this ancient Jewish culture but instead was considered shameful. There is no foundation for assuming she was some kind of exhibitionist.

Male-dominated cultures like Bathsheba's and our own teach women that they are responsible for men's lust.

Male-dominated cultures like Bathsheba's and our own teach women that they are responsible for men's lust. Women may think and may have been told that their behavior evokes this response in men – somehow they have telegraphed availability messages. As a consequence, when men lust after them, some women feel guilty. Somehow, they think they have caused the sexual harassment, the unwanted sexual come-ons or touching, or even the rape. Others may suggest to an abused woman that

it was because of the way she dressed or carried herself or looked at a man – or maybe she should not have been where she was in the first place. Not only must women cope with what is done to them, but then they are blamed for causing the harassment or abuse. Bathsheba exemplifies how unjust it is to assign responsibility for male lust to the woman. Bathsheba had done nothing for which she should bear guilt; David had invaded her privacy.

David, not Bathsheba, is the subject of all the action described: He rises from bed, walks around, sees, sends, and inquires. Bathsheba was only the eroticized object of his lust and sexual fantasy. David did not even know who this beautiful woman was, suggesting that they have never met. The text identifies her. She was a person with a name, Bathsheba. She was someone's daughter, Eliam's, who, if he is the same Eliam who is mentioned in 2 Samuel 23:34, was a one of David's valiant warriors in a group known as "the Thirty" and the son of his close advisor Ahitophel (2 Samuel 16:23). She was someone's wife, Uriah's, who was off fighting David's war. None of this information deters David. He did not care about her as a person; to him, she was only a beautiful object to possess, another conquest. David was pleased to receive the kingdom of Israel as a gift from God. Now as the king, he takes whatever he pleases, including another man's wife. He looked down on her in more ways than one – literally from his rooftop vista above her, and from his position of power over her. The gaze of a powerful man packs power. E. Ann Kaplan remarks: ". . . men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession which is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act upon it" (Kaplan 1983, p. 31). Bathsheba had no opportunity to return David's first gaze. She did not even know that she was in David's sights. She was defenseless and clueless that she had become an object of a powerful man's gaze desire to possess. She was simply kindling that ignited the flames of his passion, not a person with a name and a family and a life of her own.

David was king; he had covenantal responsibility for the well-being of his people, including and perhaps especially Bathsheba, since her husband was off fighting David's war. One wonders if David's lustful gaze was accidental? Was it happenstance that he was on the roof at the time she was cleansing herself? Or, was he on the roof trolling, so to speak, for sexual conquests? The text does not tell us. The result of his gaze, however, is clear and disastrous. The look led to desire; desire to intent; intent to pursuit; and pursuit to deed. Bathsheba was the victim of a man with authority, the leader of his people, abusing his power – something akin to employer sexual harassment or clergy sexual abuse today (Garland, 2006). David was violating his covenant responsibility as the God-ordained king of the nation.

When someone who has power over us and whom we trust is manipulating us, even our ability to sort out right from wrong is confused.

Everyone wants to believe that they have the power to make decisions and act on them; no one wants to feel helpless or out of control of their lives. But when someone who has power over us and whom we trust is manipulating us, even our ability to sort out right from wrong is confused. Abusers play up the power differential, increasing their power and the victim's helplessness. David did not try to meet Bathsheba on neutral ground, in at least some attempt to treat her as an equal. Quite the contrary, not only did he send for her rather than going to her himself, he increased his power over her even more by sending multiple messengers to fetch her (2 Samuel 11:4). It was a power move that could not be refused. She could not respond, "Oh, I'm not interested. Tell the king to forget it." She must have been so frightened by this summons; what could the king want from her? In thinking about this sudden request, the only reason for David to summons her that made any sense would be to tell her that her husband had been killed in battle. What else could it be? Refusal to answer David's summons was unthinkable. She had never met the king; he was known as the chosen of God; she would not have imagined that he was calling on her for sexual favors. Nothing could have prepared her for what was to come.

ABUSE OF POWER: THE RAPE

2 Samuel 11:4b

The description of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11:3 as "Uriah's wife" marks her as off limits even to a king. But, the next verse begins with a surprising "so." "So," David had her fetched to him. Presumably, David believed no one was off limits to him and that he could wield his power to have whatever and whomever he wanted, even the wife of a neighbor, a loyal servant and his soldier fighting his war. Bathsheba had no reason not to trust David; he was the God-appointed king for whom her husband was risking his life. All Israel loved David, and he was known for "doing what was just and right for all his people" (2 Samuel 8:15). She was his subject, and she knew his sterling reputation as God's appointed leader, a man purportedly just and righteous. She did not know about the vermin crawling around beneath the floorboards of his religious façade and reputation. She did not know that he was capable of stooping so low to trap and use her to satisfy his burning lusts. The setup was complete. By acquiescing to go with the king's messengers, suddenly she found herself in a compromising position, alone with the king. Who would believe her should she accuse him of any wrongdoing? It was her word against his, and he was the great king. She was only a woman. There was no escape.

Most interpreters of this story have ignored the inherent power differential between a king and one of his female subjects, and this king was invested not only with political power but also spiritual power. The power differential between King David and Bathsheba was clear from an interchange between them at the end of David's life. Bathsheba was again summoned into his presence, and she bowed and did obeisance to the king (1 Kings 1:16) and called him "my lord the king" (1 Kings 1:20). Later, in her last appearance before David, again she bowed with her face to the ground, did obeisance to the king, and said, "May my lord King David live forever!" (1 Kings 1:31). She had been by then his wife for many years, presumably his favorite wife. If she was this deferential after all these years of intimacy, imagine how she must have felt when she first was ushered into his presence. The saucy flirtation with David that the movies imagine and dramatize has no basis in the story.

David was in total control of the situation, even to the point that he may have twisted her into believing that she agreed to lay with him. He was a powerful manipulator. She must have been terribly anxious, to be fetched into the presence of the king with no idea what his agenda actually was. Anxiety would have heightened her confusion and emotions, whatever they were. Perhaps she was flattered by his attention. He was a handsome man; perhaps she found herself attracted to him. Even if she was flattered by the attention of the king, however, and even if she found him attractive, she was not responsible for what happened. Since consent was impossible, given her powerless position, David in essence raped her. Rape means to have sex against the will, without the consent, of another – and she did not have the power to consent. Even if there was no physical struggle, even if she gave in to him, it was rape. The narrator does not count it important enough even to comment on Bathsheba's feelings, or whether she fought unsuccessfully to escape him. It is not important because regardless of what she felt or did or didn't do, the narrator does not hold her responsible. David planned it, he used all of his power to manipulate

her into a situation impossible to escape, and he raped her. Then he sent her away. The encounter is only half a verse. In half a verse, her whole world changed.

"Then she returned to her house" (2 Samuel 11:4b, NRSV). What must she have felt like, pulling her clothing around her, walking out of his bed chamber, through the palace, and home? Did she pass the king's servants, or the messengers who had brought her to the king? What did they say to her, or did they just stare at her? What knowing looks were cast behind her? Shame flamed on her face. Perhaps she was going over and over in her mind how she could have let this happen, blaming herself. Perhaps David had told her that he had watched her, implying that what happened was her own fault for not realizing she was in his view. She would be inclined to believe this powerful man, because there was no one else who could help her sort out what she had been through. How could she let this happen? A question that often helps women who have been abused by a man in power is, "Would this have happened if he were your neighbor and not your king/boss/pastor?" Almost always, the answer is "no." No, because then she would have had her own power and ability to say no. Bathsheba lay with David not because she wanted to but because she could do nothing to stop him. If she realized her powerlessness, that too made her feel ashamed.

Sexual abuse is inherently shaming. Any time one person treats another as an object to be used to gratify needs rather than as an "Other," worthy of respect, the user shames the one used (Horst, 1998). This shaming is accentuated when the abuser is a spiritual leader, as David was. Because he had redefined what was right based on his own needs as the God-appointed king, she may have been left questioning her own ability to distinguish right from wrong. David showed no remorse for what he had done. If this is king that does justice for all his people, then what was this? So she walked home, blamed and shamed. And that shame and blame has continued to be heaped on her throughout the centuries.

At a social gathering last winter, a woman who works in a crisis pregnancy program with teenagers began talking to us about a Bible study curriculum that she has used with teenagers that has a title something like "Naughty Girls of the Bible." "You know," she said, "Women like Rahab and Bathsheba. Prostitutes and adulteresses." When we suggested that perhaps the label "adulteress" does not fit Bathsheba, that Bathsheba was instead a victim of abuse of power, the woman was stunned. Then she began pondering out loud. "You are right; how could she say no to the king?" Then she said with some shock, "Why haven't I ever thought about her in this way?" The response, of course, is that too often it is only men in power who read the Bible to us. Biblical scholars have identified a common theme in the stories about struggles over kingly succession: "the woman who brings death" (Gunn, 1978, p. 43). That may be a literary theme, but in real life it is further victimizing the victim by blaming her rather than seeking justice for her. The woman has done nothing wrong except being beautiful and vulnerable. It is sin that brings death, and the sin is David's.

The woman has done nothing wrong except being beautiful and vulnerable. It is sin that brings death, and the sin is David's.

Even if Bathsheba had not been someone's wife, she was a person created in God's image. When Jesus condemned sexual lust, he denied the right of the man to sexual freedom on the basis that the woman, whether she is someone's wife or not, is a person who is on the same level and possesses the same dignity as the man: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27-28). Adulterous looks, Jesus made clear, are sins against her, not just against her husband.

The English translation here creates some problems. In Greek, the verb "to lust" and "to commit adultery" can take direct objects; they are actions done to another. English idiom requires that we render it "commits adultery with her." The English idiom thus implies some complicity on the woman's part when there is none. The woman is simply being lusted after. The Greek idiom more readily expresses the problem that Jesus was trying to correct. The man "lusts" her (direct object) and

"adulterates" her. In other words, the lustful look dehumanizes the woman. She is reduced to an object for the male's sexual gratification. Sexual sins are a self-centered exploitation of others. The verb "to lust" in Greek is the same verb form that is often translated "to covet." In English, we can speak of a lust for power and lust for gold with the implicit idea of gaining possession of them. Sexual fantasizing sees the other person in a one-dimensional role as some "thing" that one can possess, use, and then discard. Indeed, this is what happened in David's encounter with Bathsheba. He sent for her, had sex with her, and then sent her away. He used her and discarded her.

"Sending for" and "taking" are what kings do. When Abraham was sojourning in a foreign land, he feared for his life because of the beauty of his wife Sarah. Someone might kill him to get his hands on her, he selfishly worried. So, he passed off his wife as his sister. King Abimelech of Gerar did what kings do; he "sent and took Sarah" (Genesis 20:2). This rule of might is exactly what Samuel had forewarned would happen when Israel insisted on getting themselves a human king. These are the ways of a king, Samuel protested: He will reign over you, and then "he will take your sons . . .; he will take your daughters . . . ; he will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards . . . ; he will take your male and female slaves . . . ; he will take one-tenth of your flocks. And when that happens and you cry out, the Lord will not answer you" (1 Samuel 8:11-19). In effect, Samuel warns, "You made your bed; you will have to lie in it."

Unfortunately, it is a bed that women will have to lie in as well, and against their will. Bathsheba was the object of aggression. David had taken other wives for himself – including another man's wife that he thought he had some right to because he had married her, even though he then abandoned her (Michal who had been married to Paltiel). He now took another man's wife he knew was rightfully not his. The law echoes Samuel's warning about the way with kings: "And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself" (Deuteronomy 17:17, NRSV). David went beyond what Samuel feared would happen. He acquired a passel of wives including the wives of other men – three times, Abigail, Michal, and now, Bathsheba.

Bathsheba was sent for and was taken. This was no sexual affair. An affair assumes mutual consent, and there was no indication – or even possibility for – consent. She was in a position that rendered her powerless to give consent. The two did not see one another or have sex again until Uriah was dead and David took her as his wife. Clearly, their encounter violated Bathsheba in order to satisfy David's lust. There was no relationship; he tossed her aside. How could she ever explain what had happened to her husband? In fact, she has never been allowed to explain what happened. She has no voice in the text to cry out her innocence, so that throughout the centuries she has been perceived as a guilty accomplice in sin. She has been seen as "committing adultery" with David. Her portrayal in the movies and popular imagination compounds the injustice of her rape by making her a seductress rather than a victim of the king's abuse. She was beautiful and desirable to a lecherous monarch, but that does not make her an adulteress. She did not ask for this. The problem with sin is that it does not simply affect the one who commits it. The fallout spreads to innocent and guilty alike. Though guiltless, the victim suffers punishment. Had her husband Uriah lived to find out about it, he probably would have never been able look at her in the same way again, even if he tried to understand things from her perspective. She had been adulterated.

Perhaps, since David is a biblical hero, readers want to clear him of any unscrupulous behavior. As when pastors abuse their power, people want to turn a blind eye or make excuses for him. The rationalization is that David was going through a mid-life crisis. He had grown weary of the battles that marked his kingship and was leaving the fighting to others. All of his multiple marriages were unfulfilling. One can imagine him excusing himself: "My wives are so cold; they do not understand me;" or "The duties of my office are so heavy; I am a great man with great needs that need to be met if I am to continue to serve my people well." The narrator of this story, however, drops enough clues to expose David's sinfulness, though he had no intention of dealing with the issues that we are attending to in this chapter. The verbs describing what David did are telling: He saw, he sent, he took, and he lay.

The frightening aspect of this story is that David was known as a man after God's own heart, a "good" man. Our world is full of such "good"

men. This is not just some ancient story; it is a story repeated over and over today. Abuse of power happens in schools, in the workplace, and in the church, when people have opportunity to use and abuse others because they have the power to do so and there are no protective safeguards in place. Our families and our communities are home to those who have been victims of these "good" men who use the perception of their goodness to carelessly manipulate and abuse others. As we can see from Bathsheba's story, expecting potential victims to "just say no" and stand up for themselves is not a realistic strategy for preventing leaders from abusing their power. Nor can we assume that it is only "bad people" who unleash evil in their lives and the lives of others. Perhaps even more dangerous are "good" men with unchecked power over others. Men like David. Who was to tell him no?

HIDING EVIL WITH EVIL

2 Samuel 11:5-27

The little detail that Bathsheba was purifying herself from her uncleanness, her menstrual period, (2 Samuel 11: 4) is a critical one for the story. Her bathing was part of her ritual cleansing from her menstruation (see Leviticus 15:19-24; McCarter, 1984, p. 286; Halpern, 2001, p. 35). It establishes David's paternity for the baby that was now growing in her womb. She was not pregnant before David had sex with her. Her husband Uriah was still at the battlefront when she was impregnated. Only David can be the father of this child. David took her at the time in her cycle when she was most likely to become pregnant. There is no indication that David desired her to become his wife. Otherwise, why did he take such pains to try to get Uriah back home so that he could be assumed to be the father? Presumably, he wanted the marriage of Uriah and Bathsheba to continue. He just wanted to steal Uriah's wife for a moment of pleasure for himself.

Bathsheba sent word to David, actually two words: "I'm pregnant!" This message is the only action she takes that is recorded in this episode. The narrator does not record her inflection, but one can bet it was not an exclamation of joy. Little did she know that her words would seal her husband's doom. She remained a naive victim. She could not have imagined what the king would do when he summoned her. She also could not have imagined what he would do when he heard these words. She was trapped and desperate.

David plotted alone, the face of evil becoming rapidly more sinister. He continued to wield power over Bathsheba, neither consulting nor comforting her, much less expressing any remorse at what he had done to her. He decided to call Uriah home from the front on the pretense of gathering information about how the battle was going and also giving a battle weary soldier a chance for some rest and relaxation – and to sleep in his own bed. He invited him, perhaps with a wink, to go home and "wash his feet," a euphemism for sexual intercourse (2 Samuel 11:8). Then, when a baby arrived on the scene nine months later, no one would be the wiser.

David's scheme failed. Uriah was too good for his own good. Uriah did not think or act the way David did, who appears to be driven by desire to do what he wanted without regard for the cost to others. Uriah of Gentile ancestry – identified seven times as a "Hittite" in case the dense reader might miss it the first time – had a sense of duty and honor that put king of Israel to shame. His loyalty to his comrades in arms foiled David's plan. He refused to go home to the comfort of his own bed and wife, and declared: "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing" (2 Samuel 11:11, NRSV). No cajol-

ing on David's part would cause him to yield and break the unwritten code of solidarity with his band of brothers. Uriah would take cold showers and do pushups and would not go into his wife while his companions are slogging away in the front line trenches. In effect, he rejected the life that David was leading – enjoying all the comforts of home. Depriving himself of the comforts of home, however, is not the point. "Rather, intercourse would render him ritually unclean for combat" (Halpern, 2001, p. 36). Uriah's sense of propriety and his concern for ritual purity contrast with David's gross impropriety and moral impurity.

Tragically, Bathsheba sat home alone, in the crisis and shame of this unwanted pregnancy. Did she have anyone with whom she could share her anguish? Did she know that Uriah was even in town and did not come to her? Would she have told him what David had done? We do not know.

Rather than being put to shame by Uriah's show of honor, David pulled out Plan B from his play book of treachery and put it into action. He had to act quickly if he was going to prevent the gossips from fingering him as the possible father. He instructed General Joab to put Uriah in the front where the fighting would be fiercest and then to withdraw so that Uriah would be killed. Uriah would lead the charge while his fellow soldiers would slink away in retreat. So much for being repaid for his loyalty to his king and to his comrades.

Again, David used his royal power not to protect his subjects but to destroy them in order to accomplish his own self-centered ends.

Again, David used his royal power not to protect his subjects but to destroy them in order to accomplish his own self-centered ends. When Uriah was dead, he would marry Bathsheba to cover up the rape and resulting pregnancy. The cover-up came at high cost, but it made for a perfect crime that no one would discover, or so he thought. David had Uriah set up not because he wanted to marry Bathsheba but instead wanted to conceal the sordid truth behind her unexpected pregnancy. He was consumed by his desire not to lose public face, his legacy – the public persona that he was of upstanding moral character and a worthy king (2 Samuel 8:15). He would do anything to maintain this false face. He was abusing his God-given power so that he could continue to look like a righteous man of God.

David's plan worked to perfection this time; Uriah died in battle a hero. David who wept over the deaths of his enemies, Saul (2 Samuel 1:11-27) and Abner (2 Samuel 3:31-39), shrugs off Uriah's death and the deaths of the others who died with him following the fateful orders the basically were a death warrant (2 Samuel 7:14-25). His cold-hearted reaction in 2 Samuel 11:25 may be paraphrased, "Oh well, such is a soldier's sad fate" or "Oh well, we all have to die sometime" (Arnold, 2003, p. 530).

Uriah's death symbolizes what commonly happens when women are abused by men in power. Their husbands also become victims, killing their marriage, killing them spiritually, and in Uriah's situation, resulting in outright death. If the violation becomes public, the shame can be so overwhelming that it drives some to suicide or to violent revenge. Uriah never knew the evil done to him by the king he so faithfully served.

The war office notified David of Uriah's death. David told the messenger to tell General Joab, "Don't let this upset you. It's a war after all. Press on." Without remorse, he perceived his reputation to be more important than the life of a faithful servant. He was above it all, above morality, above the law of God. The uniformed soldiers duly notified the new widow that her worst fears had been realized; her husband had fallen in battle. "He died bravely, his commander wanted you to know. We did all that we could to save him." The Bible tells us, "When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him" (2 Samuel 11:26, NRSV). It is the only mention of emotion in the whole chapter. Bathsheba grieved for what had been stolen from her, the man she had loved. Did David tell her what he had done, pointing out, perhaps, his ability to wield power over life and death, thinking she would be glad to have this opportunity to be his wife? We do not know. But she was not glad over Uriah's death; she grieved. Imagine how her grief would have been compounded if she learned that David had plotted

the murder of her husband because of her pregnancy. Her inability to protect herself from David had now resulted in her husband's death.

In the Bible, laments call for God to hear, to see, and to intervene. In response to Bathsheba's lament, the Lord does see: "But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the LORD" (2 Samuel 11:27, NASB). There is no word here that Bathsheba had done anything to displease the Lord. She is not a co-conspirator. This deed was David's. He will not get away with it if God has anything to say about it. And God does!

GOD ANSWERS BATHSHEBA'S LAMENT

2 Samuel 12:1-14

Prophets do not engage in cover-ups, and that is why the true story gets told, though not Bathsheba's side of it. Nathan, like an ancient Detective Columbo, somehow discovered David's evil deeds and is sent by God to come before the king and confront him (2 Samuel 11:27-12:15). He sought to catch David off guard and began by telling him of a horrible crime. It turns out that it is a parable, but David does not know that until he has fallen into Nathan's trap. It was a brilliant stratagem that exposed the king's guilt. For the first time, David could see in the clear light of God's perspective what he had done and what he had become.

For the first time, David could see in the clear light of God's perspective what he had done and what he had become.

"There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; 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. 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." 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; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

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; 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. 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. 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. 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. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." 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. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child that is born to you shall die" (NRSV).

True to Nathan's word, the Lord struck down the child that Bathsheba bore to David. Sin affects the guilty and innocent alike. The baby became very ill and died despite David's prayers. And the obituary column recording the names of other beloved children in his family would grow longer.

The story about a sheep was a pin prick in the hot air balloon of David's arrogance and covetousness. There was no hiding the evil now; it was out. The story underscored how precious Bathsheba was to Uriah. Note that in this parable, the little ewe lamb, like Bathsheba, was also a victim. It did not ask to be served up for dinner. Note also that Nathan never confronted Bathsheba or accused her of sin. Nathan said nothing about Bathsheba carrying any responsibility for what had happened;

regardless of how she might have felt, she was not to blame.

The story of the lamb does not correspond with what David did at every point, making David's guilt even darker. Unlike the man in the parable of the ewe lamb, David was not offering anyone hospitality, and he took a wife, a human being, not a farm animal loved as a pet. A man with many wives wanted another man's only wife. In the parable, the ewe lamb was slaughtered for dinner, but in real life story, Uriah was the one slaughtered in battle. Perhaps Bathsheba's soul was also devastated, like unto death. She lost the honorable husband who loved her, her child, her home, and everything about the life she had known, only to be placed in the king's harem. The poor farmer could perhaps be paid four times over for the lamb, but there was no restoring Uriah's life. And we are left uncertain whether Bathsheba's life could ever be restored as well. Even if she could have filed and won a sexual harassment lawsuit, no amount of money in the world would have been enough to undo what had been done to her.

David's violation of Bathsheba did more than destroy her marriage, her child, and life as she had known it, it unleashed a domino effect of evil. David called what he has done sin; "I have sinned against the Lord," he said to Nathan (2 Samuel 12:13). Nathan, however, calls what David had done "evil" (2 Samuel 12:9). It is a subtle but important difference. David discounted the evil he has done by calling it sin. "Sin" implies that abusive behavior is universal, "for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We are all sinners, and using the language of sin normalizes and minimizes what David has done. But killing the body and soul of others in order to gratify one's own desires, however, is not universal. Although the potential for what David did may reside in all of us, not all of us are guilty of this kind of evil. Only those with power can do evil of this magnitude. It is this kind of evil that Jesus spoke of when he said that those who caused little ones to stumble might as well have a millstone tied to their necks and be thrown into the sea (Matthew 18:6). For Jesus, causing those who are "little" and who have no power to lose their way is a grave evil worthy of grim punishment, and it can only be committed by those who are the opposite of the "the little ones," those who possess power.

It becomes clear that although God could and did forgive David's sin, the evil David had unleashed continued to wreak death and destruction. An innocent baby suffered and died. Bathsheba stood by, again helpless and alone. David's grief was the focus of everyone's attention. Where was Bathsheba – weeping alone?

Where is God's grace for the victim in this story? What was done cannot be undone. Can God create anything good from the shambles David has made of his house, his family? David repents his sin but stays in power. If Psalm 51 is David's confession as it is identified in its heading, "A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba," his pleas to God for mercy are interesting:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

He went on to cry out, "Before you and you alone have I sinned." David still seemed not to understand the enormity of what he had done to others. What about Bathsheba? What about Uriah? But his sin against them was his sin against God, and God offers forgiveness to the repentant and humbled David.

One wonders if Bathsheba ever forgave him if she ever learned the truth that David had plotted

her husband's death. If she had not heard it in the rumors flying around the court, perhaps it all came out when Nathan came to call. How did she feel being seized and brought to the household of the man who had violated her, and then losing the baby that resulted from the rape? David had other wives and children; presumably, this was her first and only child. The story is about David, however, and so Bathsheba's feelings are never revealed. We are never told how she felt about David or about God. Her silence matches her helplessness. We can only read between the lines to guess what they might have been. The text says that when the baby died, David gives comfort to her (2 Sam 12:34). His comfort would be laughable if it were not so tragic in its inadequacy. David has not distinguished himself in the accounts of his exploits as a compassionate man. To comfort her, it says, he goes in and lies with her. Whose comfort was this? Nevertheless, God is at work, and Solomon is conceived.

Bathsheba became David's chief royal wife. Solomon eventually became the heir to the throne, though he was not the eldest. He continued the house of David that otherwise would have collapsed, and Bathsheba too received special mention in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:6), though it was stated so baldly that it would have made David blush and her weep to see it: "David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife," the text reads. David was forgiven his sin, but that did not mean forgetting what he had done. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, pretending not to remember what happened. The text refused to call her "the wife of David." She is recorded in the genealogy of the Messiah, the son of David, as "the wife of Uriah," reminding every reader of the whole story of how David had abused her and killed her husband.

There were complications and plots twists to the very end. Power struggles and court intrigue abound. In his old age, Abishag took Bathsheba's place as David's young and beautiful concubine and attendant, except that now David has lost his virility (1 Kings 1:1-4) and there was no Viagra in those days. If Bathsheba felt a twinge of jealousy, she could take comfort that Abishag basically functioned as David's hot water bottle, simply there to warm his bed. The man who could not control his lusts now could not perform sexually. Abishag had access to David, but there was no danger that she would bear a rival heir to the throne.

David's son Adonijah, however, sought to usurp the throne from Solomon. Prompted by the prophet Nathan, Bathsheba took action to protect her son's future. She did not appear in the narrative until David was approaching death. She had become strangely empowered while David had become impotent. She maneuvered to get what the prophet Nathan assured her that God has in store for her son, Solomon.

Where did the strength and grace to become a survivor come from, especially while living with the very man who had so mistreated her?

Her last summons before the king presents a different scene from the first summons. King David commands: "'Summon Bathsheba to me.' So she came into the king's presence, and stood before the king" (1 Kings 1:28). There she insisted that David honor his promise to make Solomon his successor. In the end, Bathsheba as Queen Mother asserted her power. She had been stripped bare – literally and figuratively – by David. She had experienced a lifetime of grief. Where did the strength and grace to become a survivor come from, especially while living with the very man who had so mistreated her? How do any of us go on when it seems we have lost everything?

First, it is important to look at survival of grief and loss as the task of a lifetime. Overcoming abuse and grief does not happen overnight. Second, God answered her cry of lamentation. When Nathan came to David and told him the terrible parable of the ewe lamb, Bathsheba no longer had to suffer in silence and secrecy. Nathan was her advocate, confronting David openly with the evil he had done to her and to Uriah. Nathan recognized and spoke aloud what David had done. Before Nathan came on the scene, the only person who knew what Bathsheba had suffered was David himself, and he was undoubtedly not a very compassionate support for her. Now Bathsheba could openly grieve her losses. To whom did she confide? David's other wives? The servants? Her mother? We do not know. But the possibility for sharing in her family

and community was now possible. Grief and loss carried in secrecy is too heavy for anyone. We need others to hear us when we cry.

Not only did Nathan make the evil done to her public so that she could begin to find her way through it, but he also cleared her of any responsibility for wrongdoing. If she had blamed herself for any of the evil that had befallen her family through David's actions, the prophet Nathan cleared her. It was David. And because of Nathan, David repented.

God answers our prayer in unexpected ways. At the time, it may feel like no answer at all. Bathsheba's lament to God was answered by the prophet Nathan. Because of Nathan, the evil was confronted, David repented, and with God's intervention, Bathsheba and David began a life together that gave Bathsheba purpose as the mother of Solomon, from whose line the Messiah would come.

No one expected her to forget what happened – not even the genealogist of Matthew. She was a woman of sorrows, of losses. We are all quilts of our experiences, sewn together in one fabric of our life. We cannot forget those experiences without forgetting who we are. But she does not deserve the blame and shame that have been visited on her for centuries. Instead, she deserves admiration as a survivor, a woman of strength and purpose.

In the end, it was David who must consent to her wishes: "As the Lord lives, who has saved my life from every adversity, as I swore to you by the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne in my place,' so will I do this day" (1 Kings 1:30-31). Bathsheba bowed before her liege and said, "May my lord King David live forever!" But it will not be this King David who lives forever. It will be the Messiah, the Son of God.

No joyful wedding launched Bathsheba and David's family. Instead, they built a family on grief, on loss, on rape, on murder. It makes some of our families' craziness seem tame. Moreover, it was all so public. Gazing from roof that fateful day upon Bathsheba below, David thought he could sin in private. In the end, everyone in his world and since would know what David had done to Bathsheba, to Uriah, and the reason their infant died. Perhaps because it was public, they could face what they had done and move on. They could not hide from one another, from their community, and especially from themselves. It is only when we can say "This is what we have done; this is what we have suffered" that we can begin to heal. We find that no sin is too big for God to forgive; no grief is too deep for God to comfort.

REFERENCES

Arnold, Bill T. (2003). *1 & 2 Samuel. NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Gunn, David M. (1978). The story of King David: Genre and interpretation. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplements* 6. Sheffield: JSOT Press.

Garland, Diana R. (2006). "When wolves wear shepherds' clothing: Helping women survive clergy sexual abuse." *Social Work & Christianity*. 33 (1), 1-35.

Gunn, David M. (1996). "Bathsheba goes bathing in Hollywood: Words, images, and social locations," *Semeia*. 74, 97-98.

Halpern, Baruch (2001). *David's secret dreams: Messiah, murderer, traitor, king*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Horst, Elisabeth A. (1998). *Recovering the lost self: Shame-healing for victims of clergy sexual abuse*. Collegeville, MN: Order of St. Benedict.

Kaplan, E. Ann (1983). *Women in film: Both sides of the camera*. London: Routledge.

McCarter, P. Kyle, Jr. (1984). *II Samuel. Anchor Bible* 9. Garden City: Doubleday.

Rutter, Peter (1989). *Sex in the forbidden zone: when men in power – therapists, doctors, clergy, teachers, and others – betray women's trust*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.