



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Hope-Filled Christmas

By Pastor Bryan Clark

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In many Christian circles today, grace has lost its power. It 's a term we throw around in Christian circles; it 's kind of a cliché. It 's become safe; it 's comfortable; it 's predictable; it 's anemic and has little power to change a life. But, when you read through the Scriptures, grace isn 't like that at all. Grace isn 't safe; it 's not soft; it 's not comfortable. It 's kind of raw; it 's edgy; it 's very unpredictable and sometimes seems to go contrary to everything we believe is decent and right, to the point where sometimes it just seems downright offensive. There 's probably no story in the Bible that better illustrates that than our story today. If you have a Bible, turn to 2 Samuel, Chapter 11. What 's preceded Chapter 11 is the story of David on a roll. David is King of Israel and God has blessed him with one victory after another. It would be fair to say the nation of Israel had never experienced this degree of safety and prosperity—perhaps the greatest moments in the history of the Hebrew people—but because of the events of Chapter 11, that would never be true again.

We pick it up in Verse One:

Then it happened in the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the sons of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. But David stayed at Jerusalem. (*NASB, 2 Samuel 11:1)

Now what are the signs of spring—the trees budding, the flowers blooming, the kings going off to war? At least that 's the way it was in the Ancient Near East. Winter was the rainy season. They couldn 't move but, as soon as things dried up, the kings would go out to fight. You can get the content of that opening paragraph with three verbs: David sent; they destroyed; David stayed. Basically, David sends the army out to battle and this isn 't a small force. It says ...all Israel...; this is the full army. But at a time when David should have been out leading his troops, as kings should do, David stays in Jerusalem. I would suggest to you, the times in our life when we make the most reckless decisions are not times of adversity; they are times of prosperity. That 's exactly what 's happening here. Robert Alter, one of the experts of Hebrew narrative says, "This is a sedentary king with a dangerous amount of leisure time."

Verse Two:

Now when evening came David arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance.

You can 't miss that the narrator describes David in the evening, just getting out of bed. That 's an important detail. In the Ancient Near East, siesta time would have been right after lunch in the

spring of the year. So, you take a little nap and then you get back to life. Here it is evening, and David is just crawling out of bed after spending the entire afternoon taking a nap. So, you have the army out at war, fighting and shedding their blood for the sake of the kingdom, while the king spends his day napping. Now he 's up in the evening and he sees a very beautiful woman, and we kind of get a feeling where this story is going.

So, David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" (Vs. 3)

Now it 's very unusual in a Hebrew text to have a woman identified both by her father and by her husband—kind of this double identification. The reason was probably, because we know from other texts, that both Eliam, her father, and Uriah, her husband, were warriors. They were among the elite forces. At the end of 2 Samuel, we 're told Uriah was among the best of the best. This guy was a warrior who was willing to lay it down for the sake of the kingdom. So, you have basically two of David 's most trusted, favored, elite soldiers connected in this story. One is Bathsheba 's father; one is Bathsheba 's husband. Now, throughout this story, Uriah is referred to as Uriah the Hittite. Of course, Hittite would have been a non-Jew—a non-Hebrew—but his first name, Uriah, is a Hebrew name. So, it 's believed the family had been part of the Hebrew people for some time. His name actually means The Lord is my Light. So, you have this scene where David sees this beautiful woman, but this woman belongs to two of his most trusted, elite soldiers and we find ourselves thinking, —Surely he wouldn 't.

Verse 4:

David sent messengers and took her... (Vs. 4a)

That word took...took her...there is really important. You go back to 1 Samuel, where the nation of Israel cried out and said, "We want a human king!" They, in essence, rejected God as their King and said, "We 'd like a human king like all the other nations." One of the things that God said to them through Samuel the prophet was, "If we do this—if you get a human king—know this; that king will take what he wants and he will take your sons and he will take your daughters." Now, here, is the fulfillment of exactly what was prophesied.

David... ..took her and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said, "I am pregnant." (Vs. 4-5)

Now that paragraph doesn 't has many adjectives; it 's driven by verbs. It 's meant to keep the pace going quickly. So, it sets up this scene where David—1, 2, 3—has an adulterous affair; it 's over; she goes home. It 's meant to create this picture that it was that fast, and yet a moment of pleasure would cause a lifetime of regrets. From that moment on, neither David nor his family nor the kingdom will ever be the same again. David takes her; he sleeps with her. The idea of her bathing carries the idea, that she would have been just finishing her cycle, which guarantees she was not pregnant, which then guarantees that this was indeed David 's child. The only words that Bathsheba speaks in the entire story are two Hebrew words, three English words, "I am pregnant." Now David has a problem.

Then David sent to Joab, saying, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." So, Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked concerning the welfare of Joab and the people and the state of the war. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." And Uriah went out of the king's house, and a present from the king was sent out after him. But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord and did not go down to his house. Now when they told David, saying, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in temporary shelters, 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? By your life and the life of your soul, I will not do this thing." (Vs. 6-11)

So, David comes up with a plan. He brings Uriah home, chats with him about the war, says, "You know, why don't you just go home and relax, spend a little time with your wife?" He sends a gift—most believe it was food and wine— "Have a lovely romantic evening." Of course, he's hoping that Uriah will sleep with his wife and then think that this is his child. But Uriah doesn't go home. He sleeps outside the king's gate with the servants, and the word comes back to David that Uriah didn't go home. So, David says, "What's your problem? I brought you home; I let you spend a couple nights with your wife; how come you didn't go home?" And Uriah reveals his unbelievable loyalty and integrity with the king. He says, "How could I possibly go home and have a party and sleep with my wife when my fellow soldiers are out on the battle fighting a war?" Now, you have to put that statement up against the fact that David was spending his afternoons napping, while these soldiers were fighting. So, you have this integrity of a soldier in the face of David, the adulterer.

Then David said to Uriah, "Stay here today also, and tomorrow I will let you go." So, Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. Now David called him, and he ate and drank before him, and he made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his bed with his lord's servants, but he did not go down to his house. (Vs. 12-13)

David tries one more time: "This time we'll pull him in; we'll have a little party; we'll get him drunk; surely, he'll go home and sleep with his wife." But he doesn't. He still sleeps with the servants outside the king's gate. One commentator comment that, "A drunk Hittite has more integrity than the Hebrew king." That's quite a statement.

Now in the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. He had written in the letter, saying, "Place Uriah in the front line of the fiercest battle and withdraw from him, so that he may be struck down and die." So, it was as Joab kept watch on the city, that he put Uriah at the place where he knew there would be valiant men. The men of the city went out and fought against Joab, and some of the people among David's servants fell; and Uriah the Hittite also died. Then Joab sent and reported to David all the events of the war. He charged the messenger, saying, "When you have finished telling all the events of the war to the king, and if it happens that the king's wrath rises and he says to you, 'Why did you go so near to the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall? Who struck down Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall?'— then you shall say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.'" (Vs. 14-21)

David so trusts Uriah that he actually puts Uriah's death notice in his hands to be delivered to Joab. Uriah delivers the note; Joab reads it. He knows in order for this not to look like some sort of a setup, that other soldiers must die as well. So, he puts them in a place where there 's fierce fighting and not only Uriah, but several other faithful soldiers die. He brings a messenger in and says, "You need to go tell David this is what happened." But David does have a bit of a habit of attacking messengers that bring news he doesn 't wants to hear, so Joab 's a little concerned about that. So, he says, "If David seems to be getting a little upset that this battle plan was maybe not the best plan, you just tell him, 'Uriah is dead, 'and that will quiet him down."

Verse 22:

So, the messenger departed and came and reported to David all that Joab had sent him to tell. The messenger said to David, "The men prevailed against us and came out against us in the field, but we pressed them as far as the entrance of the gate. Moreover, the archers shot at your servants from the wall; so, some of the king's servants are dead, and your servant Uriah the Hittite is also dead." Then David said to the messenger, "Thus you shall say to Joab, 'Do not let this thing displease you, for the sword devours one as well as another; make your battle against the city stronger and overthrow it'; and so encourage him." (Vs. 22-25)

So, the message comes back that soldiers have died in this battle, but among them is Uriah the Hittite. David 's response is remarkably cold. Without an ounce of compassion, he says, "You go back and tell Joab, 'Hey, don 't worry about it; that 's the way it goes. You live by the sword; you die by the sword; sometimes it happens. Just go back and attack the city; win the battle—no problem ' . "

Verse 26:

Now, when the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead [Now make sure you don't miss the wording. In Verse 26 the redundancy is meant to drive this thing home] the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah, her husband was dead, she mourned for her husband. [In case you didn't get it, Bathsheba was married to Uriah.] When the time of mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife. Then she bore him a son, but the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the Lord.

David's big cover up is completed. David had an adulterous affair with the wife of one of his most faithful and loyal soldiers. In order to cover it up, he not only killed Uriah, but several other soldiers had to die. He's now guilty of adultery. He's guilty of mass murder. He thinks he's covered it all up. At the end of Chapter 11, we are outraged. We agree completely with the words of the narrator, "The thing which David did was evil in the sight of the Lord."

Imagine you are Eliam. You are a faithful elite soldier who time and time and time again have put your life at risk for this king, willing to die for him. And while you're out on the battlefield, laying it down, he's taking long naps and sleeping with your daughter and destroying her family. Imagine if you're Uriah's brother. If you're somehow connected to this, put yourself in the story. Just imagine you're a teenage son and this is your father and mother. What has this king just done? This king had multiple wives. This king had everything he could ever want, but he's taken what was not his and he has absolutely destroyed your family. He has killed your father and he has taken your mother to be his own. You have to crawl inside this story to understand the level of outrage, and our hearts resonate with those words: "This was evil in the sight of the Lord."

Cara: Bryan, you're right. This is outrageous, because it's not just about David's initial sin. It's his cover-up, his hypocrisy, his abuse of power as a King. If we've never read this story before, what are we expecting next from God?

Bryan: Yeah, so first of all, I agree. It is outrageous. Honestly, it's upsetting: the abuse of people in power on so many levels. So, if I've never read this story before, I'm expecting God to whack him, because if I was God, I would whack him.

Arnie: Bryan, this is the perfect example that no one is immune to sin, no matter what lifestyle they have. We see it all the time in our research, that once people stop focusing on Jesus, bad things happen. We have to be plugged in to God on a daily basis, don't we?

Bryan: Right. Nobody is immune to sin. Nobody gets up in the morning and says, "I think I'll ruin my life today", but every day Christians do, so we dare not get careless. All it takes is one bad decision on one day, to have serious effects on our life.

Cara: Bryan, this takes us back to James and his teaching about how desire is conceived, and then that gives birth to sin. What was David's first step into trouble?

Bryan: It sure does take us back to James. If you just go by what the text says, he should have as King been out at war fighting battles, but he wasn't. Actually, he was home taking a nap. You can't miss the fact that while his men were out fighting for the kingdom, David's napping, and then one thing leads to another and he's in trouble.

Cara: I thought it was strange. David got careless because God had been so good to him.

Bryan: Yeah, that's a really important part of the story, is there was so much peace. God had given him so many victories. David had become so strong that he stayed home, because he could, because he had become so powerful. It's a good reminder that when we're in crisis, we tend to be much more tuned in to God. When we're comfortable, we tend to get careless.

Arnie: So David's sin with Bathsheba is one thing, but then he runs and hides. I mean, what's with that? But I'm sure you see a lot of this as a pastor, don't you?

Bryan: Yeah, so I see it all the time. Damage control, trying to cover up sin. One bad decision leads to another and pretty soon it's a huge mess, and it didn't have to be that way. I like to tell people that the course of your life, or what I sometimes refer to as the trajectory of your life, will not ultimately be determined by whether or not you made mistakes. We all do. It will be determined by how you respond when that mistake is discovered.

Cara: We talk a lot about David, but Bathsheba I think is very interesting, because I don't think she has a lot of choice, but at the same time is she sinning? I mean she's taking a bath right out there.

Bryan: It's hard to figure out what her role is in all this. It wasn't unusual to take a bath on top of the roof, and the castle would have been high enough to see that. Clearly, she couldn't refuse the King. She had no say in that matter. But did she intend to be seen? Was that a bit of a setup? The text doesn't blame her. So, we'll leave it at that.

Cara: I know God's grace shows up in her life too. In fact, she's included in Christ's genealogy.

Bryan: Yeah. So, Second Samuel 12 to me is shocking. As a matter of fact, everything about it in terms of Bathsheba getting pregnant again and having Solomon just feels so wrong, like it shouldn't be, but it's a reminder of the scandalous nature of God's grace.