

DAVID AND BATHSHEEBA

Introduction

It's one of those stories. People's reactions vary. Some will say, 'The Bible doesn't hide the faults of God's people, does it?' Some would condemn David forever if it didn't say that God had put his sin away. The standard secular response is to take a simplistic view, smile, and say, 'What he did was perfectly natural; what's your problem?' if we are wise we might even respond by saying, 'If it could happen to King David it could happen to anyone.'

What is the point of the story? What is the writer telling us?

1. We pick up the secular response, 'What's your problem?' The answer is not what they assume; it is not about a physical act, it is about relationship.
2. God has an interest in our relationships, whatever kind they are.
3. To succeed, we need the Spirit of God to guide and help us.

It is about relationships

The emphasis in this story is not on a physical act but on the relationships involved. Some people think the Bible downplays the importance of a sexual union, almost as if it were something to be ashamed of. Quite the opposite.

The Bible treats it as an important gift from God. In the Book of Genesis the creation narrative refers specifically to humanity as 'male and female', and portrays God as saying it was 'all very good', and telling our first parents to 'multiply' and fill the earth.

In the New Testament Jesus' first miracle was performed at a wedding, and one of the epistles describes teaching that promotes celibacy as 'a teaching of devils'. If certain parts of the church had paid more attention to that they might not have problems with some of their priests.

The disapproval in the story is because of the implications for the relationships involved.

Take the case of David's victims, Uriah and Bathsheba first. Jesus reiterated the teaching of the creation narrative which is, 'They are no longer two, but one flesh. What God has joined let not man put asunder'. The key idea is that a new unit has been formed that supersedes the individuality of the people involved; it is more than a contract between two people, it is a new entity. David's action disrupted that, even before he arranged Uriah's death.

Interestingly, the New Testament uses the very same idea for the relationship between Christ Jesus and his church. In Ephesians 5 the human relationship is used as an illustration of it. The wife and husband are described as so closely united that when one person cares for the other person they are described as caring for themselves – 'No one hated his own flesh'. And the church is described as 'the body of Christ', one with him. He is like the head of a body – the one cannot exist apart from the other. This gives us a hint about God's interest in David's actions.

Next: the relationship between David and Uriah. The prophet's tale portrayed David as 'stealing' what belonged to Uriah. That does not mean that one person in the relationship is the property of the other – that idea was common in the Roman Empire and when the gospel spread it blew that away. No. This is saying David did not have the right to do whatever they wanted (neither did Bathsheba) – in effect he was interfering in what was part of another human being. How different from today's view that everyone has a right to do as they please.

To make matters worse, Uriah had been a faithful friend of David. It was an act of betrayal.

David had a privileged position. Instead of acting in love he entered a power relationship. He could destroy other people's lives with impunity. And greed took the place of need (for God had given him all he ever needed).

Greed. Theft. Killing. Denial. The lack of love it displayed. And the suffering that resulted. It is not surprising God took an interest in it.

God has an interest in our relationships

The first part of the story ends, 'But thing David had done displeased the Lord'.

God is a God of relationships. The expression, 'God is love' shows that. There can be no love without someone to love. God is a Trinity of Persons – love is of the essence of those relationships. The gospel and the work of Jesus is all about relationship – reconciling people to God, making them his children, forming a bond so close they are 'one body'.

So our relationships matter to him. They also matter because of our relationship with him. He made us – in that sense we are his. He loves us – our welfare matters to him. He looks for his character to be replicated in us – truth and love – and that shows in our relationships.

Think about David's relationship with God. God had chosen him from obscurity to become the leader of his people. God had rescued him from certain death when he was pursued by a paranoid monarch. God had given him success as a ruler an international influence. Yet on this occasion David treated God's word with contempt and gave occasion for God's enemies to mock him. He had wronged Bathsheba and Uriah; he had wronged God as well.

David was in denial for a long time – he made no confession to God. We have an amazing capacity to suppress unpleasant thoughts especially when they would make us ashamed. David probably reasoned that Uriah might have been killed in battle anyway, and that his death meant he was free to marry Bathsheba.

It is easy to rationalise what we do. We might even quote the Bible for it – as we see in the way the devil tempted Jesus. People sometimes say, 'I feel ok about it – God doesn't seem to mind'. David's experience shows us that feelings and facts are not the same.

When we choose to act in a spirit that is inconsistent with the Spirit of God we grieve him and he may leave us to ourselves. When we choose to act against the obvious Word of God we are shutting our ears to him – it's not surprising we think everything is ok. How long can a person live like that? Maybe years. It took a clever stratagem on the prophet's part to bring it home to him.

'But the thing David did displeased the LORD.' He had harmed two people the Lord loved – as well as himself. He had acted in a way that outraged God's moral sensibilities. He had treated God with contempt by ignoring what God had said about relationships. There would be consequences.

The estrangement might have gone on for ever. But God in his mercy sent him a friend who was willing to please God and displease King David – Nathan the prophet. It was both a rebuke and assurance of forgiveness. How we should be to accept correction! Or the trouble will continue.

Notice what the prophet said, 'The LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die'. This story is an outstanding example of God's mercy. It brings comfort as well as warning. David found forgiveness; so may we. God did not forgive because of anything David did – the message of forgiveness came at the same time as the message that found fault with him. When God forgives he does so because he is slow to anger and full of mercy. What a wonderful God!

That should encourage every one of us to come to him. And when we do find his forgiveness it should encourage us to forgive others. How would we have treated David? He gives us an example of what a forgiven person should be like when he says (Psalm 51:13), 'Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you'. When we find God's mercy we want others to find it too. It would be strange if we did not.

David's response is a classic example of how to return from a wrong course of action or a wrong attitude. He accepted the correction given – not like our natural reaction of wanting to get it over quick and get on with life. He confessed the evil of what he had done, not just that he had done it. He recognised that it showed the sort of person he was – not what he thought he was. And he hoped his experience would help other strays to return to the wise ways God has taught us.

One thing stands out – a giveaway prayer in Psalm 51 – 'Do not take your Holy Spirit away'.

We need the Spirit of God to guide and help us

This takes us back to one of the common responses to stories like this – 'It's natural; so what's your problem?'

There are two views of what a human being is – only an animal moved by our instincts, or also a son of God whose animal instincts are guided by God's Spirit. The first view would say, 'If it's natural, just do it'. The second view would say, 'What would Jesus do?'

The problem with the first view is that it brings unpleasant results – it is the survival of the fittest. Nietzsche raged against Christianity because it helped the weak. Is that really the kind of society we want?

The other view sees the Spirit of God given to his people as a result of Jesus' work. He influences them so that they show God's character in their relationships.

In Galatians 5:16-24 the writer contrasts the result of our animal instincts ('the works of the flesh') with the products of God's Spirit in his people ('the fruit of the Spirit').

The first list deals with 'the works of the flesh' and is broken down into what is sexual, then spiritual, then social, then substance abuse. The second list is the 'fruit of the Spirit', beginning with love (verse 22) and ending with self-control (verse 23).

'Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness'; David might have argued – 'that is natural, it's the hormones'. But if he should love and had self-control he would not have done it. 'Idolatry, sorcery'; people argue that any kind of spirituality is valid, but the Spirit of God would lead us away from everything else to Christ Jesus.

Then comes a list of social problems. 'hatreds, contentions, jealousy, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, rival groups (the meaning of heresies) envy, murders'. People say, 'But it is natural for people to feel jealous or envious. It is natural to lose the place sometimes – makes us feel better. It's natural to be ambitious and find ourselves in conflict with others.' That's the point. It is natural. That is what we are like when God leaves us to ourselves. But if his Spirit controls us – love and self-control will not explode in anger, envy others, form rival groups, or any of those things.

Look at the effects of the Spirit when Christ gives him to us – 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control'. Do we not wish the people around us were like that? Do we not want to be like that?

The Spirit of Christ is pulling in the opposite direction to our animal human spirit. If we indulge 'the works of the flesh' we will grieve him. If we treat his word with contempt, as David did, we will be deaf to him.

On the other hand, there is not a single human who cannot be transformed by the Spirit of the living God if they will ask for him. We don't need to say, 'That's just the way I am', because the Spirit can make us different. The person who is joined to Christ, and already has his Spirit in some measure, has enough resources to become a different person. It is not just a case of avoiding what we know to be wrong – it is a case of living a positive life, in 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control'.

That is being like Jesus. And anyone can be like that as long they don't think it is all down to them – it is the Spirit's work in them.

Conclusion

We have come a long way from a rooftop in Jerusalem. But the story has told us the importance of relationship to us and to God. It has shown us our human weakness – 'let him who thinks he is standing take heed lest he falls'. And it shows us where the solution lies to problems that are both personal and social.

How often do we ask Christ Jesus in heaven to give us his Spirit? How often do we ask the Father to give us his Spirit? He tells us to ask and promises to answer. What a difference that would make to individuals, households, churches, and communities.

'Ask and you shall receive, that your joy may be full.'