

- i. From the Davidic Covenant the Samuel narrative moves quickly to the account of David's relationship with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-12:25). If God's covenant with David represented the pinnacle of his kingship, the Bathsheba episode represented its low point. For it was this event that turned the tide in David's reign and initiated the pattern of decline that culminated in the devastation and captivity of the entire Israelite theocracy. As the height of Israel's power and glory was associated with David, so also was the nation's desolation.

The Bathsheba episode occurred during a time when David remained behind in Jerusalem while his army went out to fight the Ammonites. While walking on the roof of his palace one evening, he spotted Bathsheba bathing and was immediately taken with her beauty. When David learned who she was and that her husband was away fighting with his army, he sent a servant to bring her to him. When the servant informed Bathsheba that the king himself was calling for her, Bathsheba arose and went with him. Then, yielding to the pressure of his royal authority, she consented to allow Israel's great king to defile her (11:1-4).

But David's secret sin was not to remain hidden. Soon Bathsheba realized she was pregnant with David's child, and when she notified the king he immediately sent for her husband Uriah under the pretence of learning how the battle was progressing. David's intent was to give Uriah time with his wife so that he'd be deceived into thinking that her child was his own. But in an act of profound irony, Uriah refused to go to Bathsheba out of devotion to David and the cause of his kingdom (vv. 5-13). When David realized his plan was not going to succeed, he sent his faithful soldier back to the battlefield with instructions to Joab to have the army draw back from him in battle so that he would be killed (vv. 14-25).

As soon as he received notice that Uriah had died in battle David made Bathsheba his wife. No doubt he hoped that, now at last, his sin would never be exposed. If someone questioned the timing of the child's birth, he could remind them that Uriah had been in Jerusalem during the time when Bathsheba became pregnant. And with Uriah dead, there was no one to refute the claim that he had fathered this child. Surely David's loyal servants would never divulge the ugly truth.

David's actions are astonishing in their own right, but even more so when considered alongside those of his predecessor.

- When Israel petitioned Samuel for a king, Yahweh had warned them that a human ruler – regardless of who he might be – would exercise his reign according to the “procedure of the king.” The Lord was willing to honor their request, but first the sons of Israel needed to understand that their new king would exploit his power and authority and the people and resources under his control to his own advantage. And just as Yahweh had warned, so it turned out to be with Saul. Saul ruled in his own name and for his own sake, and the Lord's subsequent rejection of him testified that the Abrahamic promise of a royal seed was yet to be fulfilled.

- On the other hand, David seemed in every respect to be that ruler. Yahweh's own assessment was that David was a man after His own heart, unlike Saul who met the people's unspiritual expectations. Furthermore, he was a descendent of the royal tribe of Judah and a proven warrior and shepherd. Above everything else, God had made His covenant with David to establish and secure his throne and kingdom forever.

But now, emerging from the glorious light of the covenant that had affirmed his unique distinction, David was repeating Saul's sin. The man who had once been subjected to abuse of power, deception, conspiracy, and malicious intent at the hands of Israel's rejected king was now doing the same thing to his own subject. Like Saul before him, David conspired against his devoted servant purely out of a motive of self-service and self-preservation. For all his excellencies as the Lord's anointed, David, too, showed himself to be just another human king – a man who, like all others, would rule in accordance with the “procedure of the king.”

Though the Bathsheba episode is most often treated as a moral lesson in the danger of unguarded eyes and passions, its true meaning and importance are found in its relation to the developing biblical storyline: *David's failure reached beyond his personal life to his role within and contribution to God's all-encompassing redemptive plan.* This is evident in the way Yahweh confronted David through the mouth of His prophet (12:1-14). Nathan used a parable to show the king the true nature and seriousness of his actions, and he followed that parable by declaring to David the consequences of what he had done.

- 1) The first consequence was intrinsic rather than punitive. In ancient Near Eastern conception, kings were typically regarded as divine sons of one or more of their national deities, so that everything about a king as well as the kingdom he ruled reflected back on those particular gods. God used that way of thinking about the ideas of kingship and kingdom to facilitate Israel's witness to Him in the world.

By divine design, Yahweh's covenant “son” would make Him known to the surrounding nations by its faithfulness to His covenant. The Gentiles would come to know Israel's God by observing Israel meet the demands of its sonship. Thus Abraham's seed would fulfill their mandate of mediating the knowledge of the true God to the families of the earth.

But, if the Israelite nation bore witness to Yahweh by the way it lived in the sight of the world, Israel's king did so in a preeminent way. The nations around Israel understood David's rule as the exercise of Yahweh's rule. The king of Israel was the son of Israel's God, which meant that David's personal unrighteousness and failures reflected back upon his divine Father as much as his triumphs did. Thus Nathan declared to David that his actions had implications far beyond his own house and kingdom: he had given the enemies of God reason to blaspheme Him (12:14).

David's failure to fulfill Yahweh's design for the kingship was equally his failure as a son of Abraham. The Abrahamic Covenant had identified as the central characteristic of Abraham's descendents their unique appointment to be God's vehicle for carrying His blessing to the ends of the earth (ref. again Genesis 12:3, 22:15-18, 26:1-4, 28:10-14). This blessing amounts to the true knowledge of Yahweh, and the world would come to know Him – as well as what it means to be His “sons” – through the witness of covenant faithfulness on the part of Abraham's offspring. The nation of Israel was this offspring, and David was the epitomizing Israelite. Israel had failed from the beginning to fulfill its identity as the seed of Abraham and now so had David. As much as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise appeared to demand a new Israel, the Bathsheba episode indicated that it demanded another David.

- 2) David's conviction of his failure to fulfill his calling with respect to the Abrahamic mandate and his own kingship was an overwhelming consequence in itself, but God pronounced two other punitive judgments upon him. *What is crucial to note about these judgments is that each of them directly implicated the Lord's promises to David in the Davidic Covenant.* David's personal failure was to have grave implications for the perpetuity of his house and kingdom as promised in the covenant.

The first of those judgments was that God was going to take the life of the son conceived by David's sin (12:13-23). The second amounted to an extension of the first: Yahweh had determined to introduce enduring enmity, conflict, death and destruction into David's house, expressed in His declaration that the sword would never depart from it (12:10). Even David himself would feel the edge of the Lord's punishing sword (12:11).

- j. God didn't disclose the specific punishment of verse 11 just so that David would know that he, too, was going to suffer directly for his offense (cf. again 12:14); rather, it was to show him that, in parallel with the covenant promise, *the forthcoming judgment also pertained to both aspects of his house: his immediate household (dynasty) and his kingdom (dominion).* This would become explicitly clear in the fulfillment (ref. 16:15-23). In the near term, David's family was to be torn apart, but the greater punishment would be realized in the rending of David's kingdom – first in its division into two sub-kingdoms, but ultimately in the complete desolation of both “houses” of Israel. *Again, to grasp the full significance of God's judgment on David and his house it must be interpreted in the light of the Davidic Covenant that provides the larger context for it.*

- 1) In the covenant God had promised that He would build an enduring dynasty for David, and now He was taking his son. While David had other sons at that time (ref. 3:2-5), the implication remains that, by taking the life of this child, the Lord was setting Himself against David's dynasty in apparent opposition to His pledge to build and establish it.

- 2) The tearing down of David's house was further indicated by the Lord's determination to bring a sword against it. From that day forward the Davidic household was to be marked by enmity, strife, and death, and the catalyst for that tragic and perpetual state of affairs was Amnon's rape and rejection of his half-sister Tamar (13:1-20). In an act of ironic justice, the same defiling lust that had initiated David's offense was now, in his son, the point of initiation for the Lord's punishment of that offense.

- 3) Amnon's perverse actions – and David's weak response to them – provoked the indignation of Tamar's brother Absalom, and his festering hatred and resentment provided the seed bed for his eventual rebellion against his father and attempt upon his throne. The Lord had declared that the sword coming upon David's house would include evil raised up against him personally, and one specific manifestation of that was to be David's public disgrace through the open violation of his wives by someone very close to him. That prophetic word was later to be fulfilled by his son Absalom. But more than merely a son's outrageous affront to his father, Absalom's actions powerfully communicated his determined assault on David's throne and kingdom. By taking his father's royal concubines in the sight of all Israel, Absalom was effectively proclaiming his appropriation of the kingdom itself (cf. 1 Kings 2:13-24).

When the judgment pronounced upon David's house is properly considered in terms of its historical outworking on the one hand and the promises of the Davidic Covenant on the other, the result is an unavoidable sense that David's sin with Bathsheba had resulted in the Lord rejecting his covenant with him. In this way an overt tension is set up in the biblical storyline:

- At the heart of the Davidic Covenant was God's pledge to establish David's *house, throne, and kingdom*, and those same elements were the focal point of the judgment that had now come upon David. The Lord's covenant declared that He would build David's house; His judgment pronounced His determination to tear it down.

- This alone suggests an obvious conflict, but the difficulty is fully realized in the fact that both the covenant and the judgment were to be *everlasting*. The apparent contradiction of "building" and "tearing down" could be resolved, but only if these actions were not simultaneous. But when each is declared to be perpetual, there appears to be no way to uphold both. In that case, the fact that the judgment follows the covenant seems to indicate that God had now set aside His previous promises to David.

The gravity of this dilemma becomes evident in the recognition that the end of the Davidic Covenant meant more than the demise of David's personal house and kingdom; given its place in the salvation history, the end of the covenant meant that God was renouncing every word of promise all the way back to the Garden.