

II Samuel ch.11 *“David’s Terrible Sins”*

Introduction:

Empowered by Yahweh, David had experienced great success militarily and had made the nation more secure than it had been for centuries. At the same time David had been obedient to the instructions in the Mosaic Law pertaining to the accumulation of chariots, horses and personal wealth. He had promoted justice for all the people and tried to model God’s faithfulness in his relationships. But in contrast to what we have read so far about David, in this chapter, the story takes a shocking downward turn as David’s blatant violations of God’s Law brought chaos into his life, into the royal court, and into the nation. Though on the surface this may seem unexpected, there have been hints in earlier chapters that there were flaws in David’s character. For though David did follow the Deuteronomic regulations with regard to the things mentioned above, he did not observe that same restraint in everything that was commanded in the Law. Twice earlier in the narratives that presented David’s growing political power we were told about the expansion of David’s harem. This was intended to draw attention to the fact that David was pursuing, at least in that regard, what was common practice among the kings of that era. Therefore, in that aspect of his life, David was conforming more to the values of the world than to the will of God.

In one sense, chapter eleven tells a complete story, however it is also part of a larger narrative that spans chapters eleven and twelve. References to David, Joab, the Ammonites, Rabbah, and Jerusalem in both chapter eleven (vs.1) and chapter twelve (vs.26–31) indicate that these chapters represent two parts of a single story, and that story represents a pivotal turning point in the story of David.

For Bible readers throughout history, the story of David and Bathsheba has aroused both dismay and astonishment; dismay that King David, with his manifest piety, could also engage in such heinous sins, and astonishment that the Bible narrates it with such unrelenting openness, particularly since earlier chapters presented him as one who found favor with God, and who is ultimately presented in the Old Testament as a type, picturing the coming Messiah. But this story was included because it revealed important things about God and about David, and since the Scriptures are a revelation of truth, it does not avoid unflattering realities that manifested themselves in the lives of God’s people.

I. The Setting: (vs.1)

In verse one we read, *“It happened in the spring of the year, 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 people of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.”* The events that are recorded in this chapter took place against the backdrop of Israel’s ongoing conflict with the Ammonites. In the previous chapter it was recorded that the Israelites had won a significant victory over the Ammonites, after which the Ammonites fled to their capital city Rabbah to

hide behind the city's protective walls (10:6–14). The proximity of Ammon to the tribal territories of Gad and Manasseh meant that David could not ignore this menacing neighbor; thus, another, more focused military effort against them would be necessary. This was the reality that set the stage for the narration we find at the beginning of this chapter. We are told that what happened next took place “*in the spring of the year*”. The literal meaning of the Hebrew phrase is “*at the turn of the year*”, but most Hebrew scholars understand this to be a reference to Spring. Springtime marked the end of the rainy season in the Middle East. With the end of the period of heavy rains, things would dry out, which would mean that the roads would once again be in good condition (or at least you could travel on them), there would be plenty of fodder for war horses and pack animals, and an army on the march would be able get food from the surrounding fields as they travelled to and from the sites of battle. A period of several months was then available during the spring season for warfare prior to the time of harvest. At harvest time discretionary military operations would come to an end, because every able-bodied man was needed to work in the fields. Many of the Assyrian and Babylonian royal annals include the notation that a military campaign began in either the first month or the second month of the year (the period from March-May).

Next, we read that “*at the time when kings go out to battle*”. This is essentially the translation that is found in all sound modern English translations. However, some interpreters have suggested that the Hebrew word translated as “*kings*” should actually be translated as “*messengers*”. This is because the Hebrew words for “*king*” and “*messenger*” not only sound alike, but they are also very similar in regard to how they are spelled (differing only by one silent consonant). These similarities mean it would be possible that in the process of transmission the text might have been unintentionally changed. It is argued that if “*messengers*” were the intended word, then the verse would be saying that David was following the customary pattern of sending out orders for warfare in the Spring. However, the traditional reading makes the most sense to most translators because there is no convincing evidence to support the claim of a transmission error.

Next, it is written that “*David sent Joab and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the people of Ammon and besieged Rabbah*”. David sent forth his army commander, Joab, his “*men*” (the word literally means “*servants*”, and it refers to mercenary troops), and all Israel (a reference to troops mustered from each of the tribes), which would be the regular army of Israel. These were all sent to continue the war against the Ammonites. This second phase of the conflict would involve laying siege to Rabbah (depending on the size and resources of a city, a siege could take months or even years). Rabbah was the capital city of the ancient Ammonites. It was located approximately forty miles east of Jerusalem and about twenty-two miles east of the Jordan River at the sources of the Jabbok River. In order to get to the city of Rabbah from Jerusalem, one had to descend more than 3281 feet, and then after crossing the Jordan River, ascend another 3281 feet.

Finally, in this verse we are told that, “*But David remained at Jerusalem*”. The narrator's prior reference to all those who were dispatched to the site of the

upcoming battle has left many interpreters with the impression that this reference to David remaining in Jerusalem makes a stark contrast between him and his troops. It is argued that staying home in such situations was not David's usual practice (5:2; 8:1–14; 10:17). It is further added that leading one's troops into battle was a central responsibility for an ancient Near Eastern ruler (and fits with what the Israelite elders wanted from the man who would serve as their king—I Sam.8:5–6, 20). It is also argued that the Hebrew grammar in this verse is unusual. In the phrase translated as "*David remained in Jerusalem*" the subject is placed before the verb. This unusual construction would draw attention to the statement, and it would imply that David was in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, others argue that the king's absence from the battlefield at this time was not dereliction of duty. It is pointed out that David had previously remained in Jerusalem when the Ammonites were attacked (10:7). Furthermore, at some point in David's military career—quite possibly prior to the events of this passage—David's men had pleaded with him to avoid an active role in military campaigns (21:17) out of concern for the king's safety and the best interests of the nation. Additionally, it exaggerates the historical evidence to say that ancient Near Eastern kings always accompanied their troops into battle. Often ancient kings, because of the duties of state or physical reasons, did not accompany their armies when they went into battle. We have an example in the Book of Second Kings (18:17-35), the Assyrian king Sennacherib employed as his representative an official known as the Rabshekah to besiege Jerusalem. The best interpretation seems to be that the author was not trying to suggest that David should have joined his troops at the siege. It was certainly appropriate for David to go with his troops if he felt that his presence would be essential to gaining a victory in the battle. However, it was not something every monarch did every time, and we read that David was simply doing here exactly the same thing he did when he sent the army out to battle the Ammonites the last time they engaged them. The references in this verse were recorded simply to set the stage so the reader would understand that the following incident took place while David was at home and the army was engaged in a siege against Rabbah.

II. The Act of Adultery: (vs.2-5)

In verse two we read, "*Then it happened one evening that David arose from his bed and walked on the roof of the king's house. And from the roof he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful to behold.*" The phrase "*one*" evening, more literally means "*at the time of the evening*". The idea here is that the time was late in the afternoon, sometime shortly before sunset. This would have been the time of day when there would be cooler breezes due to the approach of night. Because of the cool breezes that refreshed Jerusalem in the early evening, many people would come out to socialize or to enjoy the air from the privacy of their roof tops. It was at that time of the day that we are told that David got up out of his bed which was situated on the roof of his palace. Unlike most modern houses, the houses in the ancient Near East (including royal palaces) typically had flat roofs,

and it was also common in the architecture of the day to have a living space set up on one's roof (I Sam.9:25). David's palace was most likely located on the highest ground within the old Jebusite fortress, and from that relatively high position he would have had a good view of the neighboring houses and courtyards. We are told that from his vantage point on the roof, David saw a woman bathing. Since no Israelite house had running water at that time, bathing was normally done privately, in the enclosed courtyard that was a part of many Israelite houses of the time.

A common question relating to the statement of what David saw, is whether or not the woman set herself in a place where she expected David to see her. If she did, it might mean that the narrator wanted to give the reader the impression that the woman was trying to arouse David's interest. It is tempting to think that perhaps she was. However, there is nothing in the text that specifically indicates that the woman was trying to entice David. The reality is that throughout the chapter the focus is completely on David. This does not mean that the woman was pure and completely innocent, it simply means that the narrator was focusing on David's sin in this situation, and nothing is included that would imply that he was the victim of someone else's wrongdoing.

What is evident in this account is that the words "*he saw a woman*" has an ominous sense to it. This is because there is only one other place where this phrase appears in the books of the former prophets, and that is in the story of Samson (Judg.14:1; 16:1). The story of Samson is a story about a man who came to ruin due to his uncontrolled sexual lust. The chronicles of Samson's sins begin with references to Samson seeing a woman he found attractive. And now here David is in the same situation as Samson, and the subtle comparison suggests that the episode won't end well. Additionally, we are told that that the woman was "*beautiful to behold*". Interestingly, the author chose to not use the same Hebrew word for "*beautiful*" that he used earlier when describing Abigail (I Sam.25:3). This particular term, and the overall phrase places emphasis specifically upon the woman's physical appearance.

In verse three we read, "*So David sent and inquired about the woman. And someone said, 'Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?'*" The implication here is that when David inquired about the woman's identity, he had already decided to pursue her. That choice was the beginning of the chain of sins that David committed because of his lust. David, who had been so diligent to obey God in other ways, was now choosing to be disobedient to God's warning about the danger of lust:

"Remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes"

Numbers 15:39

David's submission to his lust was inexcusable, for the deliberate steps he followed to bring her to the palace required more than enough time for him to resist the

initial, impulsive temptation. Instead, we read that David began using his royal authority to bring the woman to him.

David asked his servants who the woman was. One of them identified her as Bathsheba. Her name meant either “*Daughter of an Oath*” or “*Daughter of Seven*”. The next part of the servant’s identification of the woman is unusual. It is unusual in the sense that the servant cited not only who her husband was, but also who her father was. Though it is by no means certain, it seems likely that the reason the name of the father is mentioned here is because his identity was important in the overall narrative. This is likely because Biblical narratives are characteristically economical in their use of language and details. Therefore, when something unusual is included, it is normally because it is important. She was identified as the daughter of Eliam. It seems likely then that this Eliam is the same one who is later said to be the son of Ahithophel of Gilo (23:34). Ahithophel was one of David’s most respected advisors (15:12; 16:23). The fact that Ahithophel was Bathsheba’s grandfather may help to explain Ahithophel’s later betrayal of David in favor of Absalom’s conspiracy (15:12; 16:15). Absalom was bitter over David’s failure to execute justice (15:4, 6), and Ahithophel would certainly have nursed a similar grievance; note especially Ahithophel’s counsel in 16:20–21 that Absalom should “*lie with*” his father’s concubines, an action carried out on the roof of the palace where David first saw Bathsheba. Bathsheba was also identified as the wife of Uriah the Hittite. The name “*Uriah*” means “*Yahweh is my light*”. And referring to him as “*the Hittite*” indicated his ethnicity. His name indicates that despite his ethnicity, he was a worshipper of Yahweh. Elsewhere we are informed that Uriah was one of David’s mighty men (II Sam.23:39), and thus he had been a loyal companion of David’s for many years and was among the inner circle of David’s court. Uriah’s people, the Hittites, once had a vast empire that was centered in what is now Modern Turkey. Their empire fell around 1200 B.C., but pockets of ethnic Hittites continued to exist in David’s time in both Syria and even Israel. Uriah likely came into contact with David when he was putting together a gang of mercenaries during the time of his flight from Saul.

The servant’s observation about Bathsheba being the wife of Uriah should have put an immediate halt to David’s inquiry about her. For not only did he know that the object of his lust was a married woman, but she was also married to a man who had served David with loyalty for a long time, fighting at David’s side. The fact that these things didn’t deter David indicates that his heart was already set on committing adultery (Matt.5:28).

In verse four we read, “*Then David sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her, for she was cleansed from her impurity; and she returned to her house.*” In light of the elaborate attempt David made to cover up his adultery (vs.6-13), it is highly unlikely that he made his intentions known to his servant when he summoned Bathsheba to his palace. Therefore, it makes the best sense to conclude that no one in the palace knew what David was doing that evening. After Bathsheba was brought to David, we are told that he “*took her*”. The narrator used a verb that is frequently found in the narratives and was used to

describe the actions of those whose greed motivated them to take what belonged to someone else. Thus, the word paints David as a thief. And David did what he did despite the prohibition of adultery in the Mosaic Law (Ex.20:14; Lev.18:20; Deut.5:18) and despite the warning in the Law that the penalty for adultery was death (Lev.20:10; Deut.22:22). Having brought Bathsheba to his quarters, we are told that David “*slept with her*”, an idiomatic Hebrew expression indicating that he engaged in sexual intercourse with her.

In this verse, David’s actions are listed in quick succession. However, the pattern is broken, when in the midst of the chain of events we are told that “*she was cleansed from her impurity*”. This was intended as a parenthetical observation (indicated by the Hebrew word order). It was inserted to explain why she had been bathing earlier. The idea here is that the narrator was informing his readers that Bathsheba had been involved in a post menstruation ritual such as the one described in Leviticus (15:19-24), cleansing herself from the ritual uncleanness that resulted from her menstruation. This insertion is important because it clarifies that there was no doubt about the paternity of the child that was conceived. It could not have been Uriah’s child; it could only have been David’s. It also seems to establish that she was within the most likely time for conception when she had sexual intercourse with David (10-14 days after commencement of menstruation).

A number of interpreters observe that nothing is said about Bathsheba resisting any of David’s advances. From this they conclude that the narrator is telling us that Bathsheba was equally guilty of sin. This is most likely true; however, it is not the point the author was making here. The author’s omission of any reference to her attitudes in this incident, and the absence of any reference to any explicit motive behind Bathsheba’s actions reinforces the implication that this story is not about Bathsheba’s sins but David’s. Mercifully the narrator tells the reader what happened in the briefest possible way. God had given David everything, yet even that was not enough to make him content.

In verse five we read, “*And the woman conceived; so she sent and told David, and said, I am with child.*” In due time Bathsheba discovered that she was pregnant by the king and informed him of her condition. Her message “*I am pregnant*” are her only words in the entire narrative, but they are crucial, for it was this announcement that set in motion a course of action which ultimately resulted in the king committing murder.

III. The Failed Manipulation: (vs.6-13)

In verse six we read, “*Then David sent to Joab, saying, ‘Send me Uriah the Hittite.’ And Joab sent Uriah to David.*” David evidently concluded that Bathsheba’s pregnancy had created a crisis that required some kind of suitable resolution. So, David engineered a scheme to legitimize the impending birth. David’s plan was simple and essentially foolproof: he would bring Uriah back to Jerusalem from the Ammonite campaign for a short time and have him spend an intimate night with his wife, and then once Uriah had been with his wife, David was planning to send Uriah back to Rabbah. This way it would appear that Uriah

was the father of the child. Then, approximately nine months later, Bathsheba would have her child, Uriah would assume he was the father, and there would be no reason for anyone to suspect that David had done anything inappropriate. With this plan in mind, David ordered Joab to send Uriah to him, and Joab complied.

As in the earlier verses of chapter eleven (vs.1, 3, 4, 5), the verb Hebrew verb translated as “*send*” continues to be prominent throughout the chapter (vs.6, 12, 14, 18, 22, 27). The repetition of this verb conveys that throughout this episode David was continually using his royal power to have his way and to cover his sins.

In verse seven we read, “*When Uriah had come to him, David asked how Joab was doing, and how the people were doing, and how the war prospered.*” With Uriah’s arrival at the palace, the first part of the plan had been successfully accomplished. Next David needed to send Uriah home to his wife. But before this David had to go through the charade related to why he had summoned Uriah to Jerusalem. The pretense was that Uriah had been summoned in order to report to David on the progress of the campaign against the Ammonites.

Uriah, undoubtedly exhausted by his forty-mile journey to Jerusalem may have found the situation to be out of character for David, since all the king wanted to know was the status of the siege of Rabbah, and this sort of comparatively trivial information could have been acquired from any of the runners who regularly kept David informed about the progress of the battle. But regardless of what Uriah may have thought about the situation, he faithfully reported what he knew to David.

In verse eight we read, “*And David said to Uriah, ‘Go down to your house and wash your feet’. So, Uriah departed from the king’s house, and a gift of food from the king followed him.*” In an effort to appear generous and appreciative of Uriah’s efforts and to give the appearance that he was satisfied with the information he had been given, David instructed Uriah to go to his home and wash his feet. Usually, foot washing related to a common means of receiving refreshment and relaxation, because they lived in a land where dusty roads were the rule. However, here the expression seems to have been intended as a double entendre. At times a reference to one’s feet was a euphemistic reference to one’s genitals (Ex.4:25; Deut.28:57; Isa.7:20). Most linguists believe that here David was suggesting to Uriah that he take advantage of the situation and enjoy his wife sexually. That this was the intended idea seems to be verified by the fact that this is how Uriah himself understood David’s words:

“shall I go to my house to eat and drink, and to lie with my wife?”
(verse 11)

David’s gift of food was undoubtedly intended to encourage a festive time between Uriah and his wife Bathsheba.

In verse nine we read, “*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.*” We read here that things did not go according to David’s plan. Uriah did not return to his wife, instead he slept in the guardroom of the palace. It is helpful to note that the Hebrew word translated here as “*slept*” is the same one used to refer to David’s

sexual encounter with Bathsheba. This dual use of the word sets up a contrast between David and Uriah. David, because of his unbridled lust had sex with Bathsheba, while Uriah, her husband, out of appropriate respect for the situation he was in, refrained to have sex with his wife. All this would mean that David would have to try some other means of getting Uriah to have sex with his wife.

In verse ten we read, *“So when they told David, saying, ‘Uriah did not go down to his house’, David said to Uriah, ‘Did you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?’”* The next day, when David learned that Uriah did not in fact go down to his house (and therefore did not sleep with his wife), he summoned Uriah to find out why. David reminded Uriah that he had just come from a *“journey”*. The Hebrew term David used at times means military campaign (Judg.4:9), other times it refers to expeditions (I Sam.21:5), and at still other times it refers to missions (I Kgs.8:44). The implication of David’s question was why had Uriah not taken advantage of the break from the battlefield and enjoyed time with his wife since he had been away from her for so long?

In verse eleven we read, *“And Uriah said to David, ‘The ark and Israel and Judah are dwelling in tents, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are encamped in the open fields. Shall I then go to my house to eat and drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing.’”* In this verse we read Uriah’s response to David’s inquiry about why he had not slept with his wife. First of all, Uriah’s reference to the Ark indicates that one aspect of his resistance to David’s promptings was religiously motivated. Uriah was reminding David that sexual abstinence was a requirement for soldiers on active duty (Deut.23:10; I Sam.21:5). This was because, according to the Mosaic Law, sexual intercourse would cause one to be ritually unclean (Ex.19:15; Lev.15:18). God had revealed to His people that all sanctioned military activity was a form of service to Him, and it required His blessing for them to succeed in warfare. Therefore, in order to ensure Yahweh’s blessing on their military endeavors the soldiers needed to be ceremonially clean when they went into battle. Therefore, during military campaigns, the soldiers were to abstain from sexual intercourse. Uriah, even though he was away from the battlefield, considered himself to still be on duty and was anticipating that he would soon return to the fight. Therefore, if Uriah had sexual relations with Bathsheba, he would have rendered himself temporarily unfit for military service, and he was unwilling to do that. Both David and Uriah knew that David himself had practiced this and had required his men (which in the past included Uriah) to do the same. They had always kept themselves from women whenever they set out to do battle (I Sam.21:4–5), meaning Uriah’s abstinence was nothing new. Therefore, the first motivating factor for Uriah’s choice not to sleep with his wife was his devotion to Yahweh.

A second factor that motivated Uriah to do what he did was his solidarity with his fellow soldiers. Uriah believed it was inappropriate for him to enjoy the comforts of home and a conjugal visit with his wife while his comrades were deprived of those very things.

Uriah was so committed to his convictions about these things that he swore an emphatic oath on David's life that he would not do what David was suggesting.

Uriah's words serve as an ironic rebuke of David, a rebuke that should have been evident to David (and should be evident also to the reader). However, nothing in the text suggests that Uriah was intentionally rebuking the king. The text implies that Uriah was merely explaining himself, but with every word Uriah was demonstrating that he was a man much like David had been, while David had become something different, he was now behaving more like Saul.

There is a dispute about the translation "*dwelling in tents*". Some scholars argue that the Hebrew word translated as "*in tents*" should be rendered "*in Succoth*". Succoth was a Transjordanian site almost forty miles northeast of Jerusalem, and according to this view it was evidently the forward base that served as a suitable staging area for Israel's battles against the Ammonites. However, the traditional translation (found in NKJV, ESV, CSB, NET, NASU, NLT, NIV) is to be preferred. Though "*Succoth*" is a possible translation of the Hebrew, it is not the most natural. But more importantly, the proposed translation does not fit well with the context. The site of Succoth was quite far from Rabbah. Thus, it would not serve as a useful base of operations against that city. A second problem is not only the distance it would require for the army to travel from the base camp to the battlefield, there is also the obstacle of the terrain, the army would have to ascend a steep slope to get out of the valley in which Succoth was located in order to attack Rabbah, thus wearing out the troops needlessly prior to the battle. The final problem is that the translation contradicts what is said later in the chapter, that as Uriah was with David in Jerusalem, Joab was already conducting a siege around the city of Rabbah (vs.20).

In verses twelve and thirteen we read, "*Then David said to Uriah, 'Wait here today also, and tomorrow I will let you depart'. So, Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. Now when David called him, he ate and drank before him; and he made him drunk. And at evening he went out to lie on his bed with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.*" In growing desperation David ordered Uriah to spend one more day in Jerusalem so that the king could try a different strategy. This time David would employ a scandalous but uncomplicated tactic: the king would get Uriah drunk, hoping that his servant would then sacrifice his principles and instead be guided by passion. David's scheme ironically mirrored the circumstances surrounding the origins of the Ammonites (Gen.19:30–38), the very people the army of Israel was now seeking to defeat. Despite David's posturing as a gracious and hospitable king, his only reason for commanding Uriah to stay another night was to facilitate another opportunity for Uriah to sleep with his wife. The irony is that if Uriah had, it would most likely have saved his life.

In that culture the new day began at sunset, therefore the phrase "*wait here today and tomorrow*" refers to that day and the evening of that day (by our modern reckoning), and this explains why Uriah departed the very next morning.

Even though David succeeded in getting Uriah drunk, Uriah still did not compromise his values. Instead of going home to sleep with Bathsheba, he spent

the night among his master's servants. The wording of the verse seems to emphasize Uriah's resistance to doing what he knew was wrong. This is because we are told that he went to "*his bed*", which we might assume was at his home with his wife, but we are immediately told it was his current bed, with the royal guards. The narrative then accentuates Uriah's virtue, for even inebriated, Uriah was more pious than a sober David.

IV. The Murder: (vs.14-25)

In verse fourteen and fifteen we read, "*In the morning it happened that David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. And he wrote in the letter, saying, 'Set Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retreat from him, that he may be struck down and die.'*" Having failed in his efforts to conceal his sin by having Uriah sleep with his wife, David was now faced with a choice. He would either have to admit his sin and accept whatever consequences it brought (perhaps even death), or he would have to eliminate Uriah to conceal his sin. David chose the latter.

The Hebrew word translated as "*letter*" (*seper*) could refer to any sort of written document, but here it refers to a communique sent from a king to one of his generals, and thus the translation "*letter*" is appropriate. Though pieces of clay were sometimes used for official military correspondence, the wording here indicates that the "*letter*" that Uriah carried was either parchment or papyrus, and that it was secured with a seal marked by the royal signet ring. The purpose of the seal was to make sure that no one could look at the letter prior to its recipient without his or her knowledge. Since Uriah was originally sent to David to bring a first-hand report of the military situation, it is not unusual that David would have sent him back to Joab with official dispatches and orders (and it would not be unusual for such a letter to be sealed). In the letter David was commanding that Uriah, when he returned to the front line, be abandoned to the enemy by an unexpected Israelite withdrawal. The basic idea of the plan was clever, because as one of David's mighty men, Uriah would have regularly been placed at the head of a contingent of soldiers. In that role he would have often been expected to hold a strategic position in the midst of a battle. But by giving this order to Joab, David was basically handing down a death sentence upon a man whose only crime was being an obstacle preventing David from hiding his sin. There is nothing in the text that indicates that Joab knew the reason that David wanted Uriah eliminated, nor is anything said that indicates that Uriah was aware of either David's sin, or that he was the bearer of an order for his execution.

There is a lot of dark irony here. Years before Saul had used messengers with the intent of luring David to his death, and now David was doing the same thing. Therefore, in the story, David was no longer serving as a righteous contrast to Saul, instead, he continued to emulate the actions of the wicked king. In addition, this episode makes David's earlier complaints about Joab's murder of Abner (3:38) seem very shallow. As the scene plays out, the reader is meant to remember what the Mosaic Law said about such things, "*cursed is one who attacks his neighbor*

secretly (Deut.27:24). The implication is obvious: David was bringing upon himself a Divine curse.

Incidentally, the communication between David and Joab implies that both men could read and write.

In verse sixteen we read, “*So it was, while Joab besieged the city, that he assigned Uriah to a place where he knew there were valiant men.*” As the story unfolds it is important to recognize that nothing is said in the text about how any of those involved in David’s machinations (Joab, Bathsheba, Uriah) felt about what David was doing. The author continues to focus only on what David was doing. Again, the reason for this is that this is a story specifically about David’s sin.

In this verse we read about what Joab did in response to the message in David’s private letter to him. We find that though Joab ultimately accomplished what David wanted, he did not do it according to the specific instructions David had given to him. Rather than leaving Uriah alone, Joab put him in a deadly situation with others. It is likely that the reason Joab did not follow David’s instructions is that Joab realized that to order the withdrawal of the troops fighting with Uriah, while leaving Uriah behind would have aroused suspicion among the troops under Uriah’s command. So instead, Uriah was placed opposite an elite force of Ammonite troops so that he and the few men with him would be easily overwhelmed. The portrait we have of Uriah suggests that he would accept any assignment given to him without question, even if he didn’t agree with the proposed strategy. And the strategy of the offensive order by Joab must have seemed questionable to all of Joab’s experienced soldiers. This is because the nature of the conflict at this point was a siege of a walled city. The idea in a siege is that for those inside the city, the walls were a protective barrier that gave them an advantage should any force attack the city. However, for the army outside of the city, the walls essentially represented a trap from which the other army could not escape. Therefore, once the Israelite troops had surrounded and thus sealed off all escape routes from the city, direct attacks against Rabbah would have been unnecessary. The traditional approach, which was safer, was to wait until the people inside the city starved or voluntarily surrendered. The only reason one would attack an army in a walled city was if the army in the city attempted to leave it. But Joab was ordering an attack early in the siege (before they would have been weakened by hunger or thirst), and while the Ammonites were still behind their walls.

In verse seventeen we read, “*Then the men of the city came out and fought with Joab. And some of the people of the servants of David fell; and Uriah the Hittite died also.*” Based on what we read here, Uriah’s troops seem to have been sent on a mission to attempt a breach of the walls of Rabbah (or maybe an assault on the city gate). Israelite casualties occurred when Uriah’s men were met by a foray coming out of the city gates to engage their attackers. And apparently Joab’s order placed them too close to the walls, so that they were within range of missiles thrown or fired from the top of the walls. As poor as this strategy was, it provided a more plausible explanation for Uriah’s death than David’s instructions, and Joab’s

revision of the plan still did not result in many casualties. So, as Joab intended, David's goal was achieved, Uriah was dead.

This portion of the story closes with David having succeeded in his sinful scheme. Several times throughout the rest of the chapter it is repeated that Uriah the Hittite was dead. That statement provides a doleful refrain that emphasizes for the reader that a loyal servant of David was dead, and the poignancy and pathos of Uriah's death are not dimmed by the matter-of-fact way in which the reports of it—whether by the narrator, by Joab, or by Joab's messenger—are treated as an addendum: “*moreover*” (vs.17), “*also*” (vs.21), “*moreover*” (vs.24).

In verses eighteen through twenty-one we read, “*Then Joab sent and told David all the things concerning the war, and charged the messenger, saying, ‘When you have finished telling the matters of the war to the king, if it happens that the king’s wrath rises, and he says to you: ‘Why did you approach so near to the city when you fought? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall? Who struck Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? Was it not a woman who cast a piece of a millstone on him from the wall, so that he died in Thebez? Why did you go near the wall?’ — then you shall say, ‘Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.’*” As part of his ongoing task of keeping the king informed about the progress of the siege, Joab sent a report on the recent attack on the Ammonite stronghold. Joab knew he had to effectively disguise his report to the king, concealing from the messenger the true purpose of his mission. The messenger believed that he was simply carrying news about the siege but embedded in that message was what Joab truly wished to convey to David, that Uriah was dead. As Joab relayed the message to the runner who would take it to David, he expressed the anticipation that David might express concern about the loss of life in the failed attack upon Rabbah. However, Joab knew that the whole purpose of that attack was to bring about the death of Uriah without raising suspicions among the troops. Therefore, Joab instructed the messenger that if David did become angry, he was to tell David that Uriah was among those who died in the attack. Joab's anticipation that David might bring up the incident surrounding the death of Abimelech (Judg.9:50-53) shows that he was concerned that David might conclude from the message that his general had done something foolish. And Joab's assumption was reasonable. Ordinarily David would have been upset by the news of those casualties. He would have been upset that an attack like that had been ordered. However, Joab was also correct in his expectation that the news of Uriah's death would mollify David's anger. The reason the attack would have seemed foolish is because to get too close to a city wall in the midst of a siege was to flirt with danger, since the soldiers on the wall could attack with arrows and other missiles from protected positions. The story of Abimelech's death would have been relevant to that situation because Abimelech lost his life because he was reckless. During the siege of Thebez he stood close to a wall, and a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head, cracking his skull and killing him (Judg.9:53).

The reader should note that five times the designation “*the Hittite*” is used to refer to Uriah. The focus on Uriah's ethnicity was part of the narrator's effort to

make a contrast between David and Uriah. It was an ironic situation; a non-Israelite had behaved more righteously than David, the man after God's heart.

In verses twenty-two through twenty-four we read, "*So the messenger went, and came and told David all that Joab had sent by him. And the messenger said to David, 'Surely the men prevailed against us and came out to us in the field; then we drove them back as far as the entrance of the gate. The archers shot from the wall at your servants; and some of the king's servants are dead, and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.'*" During the interval after Uriah's departure, David was, undoubtedly waiting to hear whether or not his scheme had succeeded. The messenger arrived in Jerusalem, and he told David everything that Joab had sent him to pass on. As he did so, it is evident that he elaborated somewhat on the words of Joab, giving a few additional details beyond what Joab dictated. At the conclusion of the messenger's report was the tragic detail that the Ammonites had slain a number of David's faithful servants, including Uriah. Though it appeared outwardly that their deaths were an inevitable part of warfare, the reader knows that these men died to protect the king's sinful secret.

In verse twenty-five we read, "*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. Strengthen your attack against the city, and overthrow it.' So encourage him.'*" David's response to the news was predictable. He instructed the messenger to tell Joab that in the midst of war, life and death were matters of blind chance. Though Uriah's death was lamentable, it was not to cause the general to lose sight of the larger objective: Joab was to press the attack even harder until the city fell. The phrase "*do not let this thing displease you*" is more literally translated as "*don't let this be evil in your sight*". David was asking Joab not to think evil of him because of what happened. It is likely that to the messenger this meant that Joab was not to let what happen discourage him, but between David and Joab it was a request that Joab not judge him too harshly for what had happened. David continued to wax philosophical and quoted from an ancient proverb to remind Joab that war has an unpredictable appetite, sometimes consuming a nation's best men. In light of what was actually happening, David's quotation of that parable was an expression of callous insensitivity to the reality that he had murdered not only a loyal friend, but also a number of faithful soldiers who had put their trust in David. It was an expression of an outrageous degree of hypocrisy.

V. The Resolution: (vs.26-27)

In verse twenty-six we read, "*When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she mourned for her husband.*" It is observed by a number of interpreters that the biblical text offers no indication of Bathsheba's feelings for Uriah. It is simply recorded that she mourned for him. This is true, but one should not make too much of this. Nowhere in the chapter is anything said about anyone's thoughts or feelings. Again, the focus is entirely on what David did. Therefore, we simply aren't told how Bathsheba felt about Uriah, but neither are we told what, if anything, she felt for David. Her feelings weren't important to the author's point.

Three times in this short verse it is asserted that Bathsheba and Uriah were married. In narrative literature, this sort of repetition indicates emphasis. Therefore, the narrator was stressing once more the nature of the relationship that David violated. Additionally, in this verse there are two different Hebrew words used for husband, and in the Hebrew language, the multiplication of spousal terms would be done for emphasis. In this case there is stress on the sin of David in violating the marriage relationship, he was an adulterer.

Another dark element in this sorted tale is that though we were told earlier in this book that David had mourned, wept and fasted in response to the death of Saul and Jonathan (1:12), nothing is said about David shedding any tears for Uriah and the other men whom he had murdered.

In verse twenty-seven we read, “*And when her mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.*” The standard period of mourning was seven days (Gen.50:10). Only exceptional individuals merited a longer time (thirty days for Moses and Aaron-Deut.34:8; Num.20:29). In the case of a grieving widow, this would allow her the usual amount of time associated with other forms of impurity before she could consider remarriage (Lev.12:2; 15:19).

Since the husband of Bathsheba was now dead and the period of her mourning was over, the way was open for David to bring her to his house. The Hebrew phrase translated “*had her brought*” is literally “*sent and collected her*”, which continues the emphasis on David’s abuse of royal power. David married Bathsheba as quickly as possible so as to have the baby’s birth removed as far as possible from when their marriage began. By doing this David hoped to forestall any suspicions that premarital relations had taken place. Perhaps, as in the case of Abigail, David may have been outwardly acting out the part of a royal, surrogate kinsman-redeemer (gō’ēl). David might have claimed that he was taking on that responsibility because Uriah, being a foreigner, had no near kinsman living in Israel. As such, David would have assumed the lifelong responsibility of caring for the needs of Uriah’s widow, obligating himself to father a child in order to raise up an offspring to preserve Uriah’s family line (Gen.38:8; Deut.25:5–6; Ruth 4:5). Such a pretext would have made David’s actions toward Bathsheba seem to be truly noble and would have accounted nicely for the birth of the son.

So, Bathsheba became David’s wife, and in due course a son was born of their earlier adulterous act. That the child is not named is perhaps because his life was so short, he died within seven days after birth.

At the conclusion of the verse, we read about Yahweh’s perspective on what David had done. No matter how honorable and magnanimous David’s actions may have appeared to those watching from the outside, Yahweh knew the truth. Yahweh is never mentioned in this chapter until this closing verse. But here, at the conclusion of the story Yahweh and His perspective returns to the narrative. We read that “*the thing that David had done displeased the LORD*”. There is an important correlation of words between this verse and verse 25. More literally rendered the verses read:

- (vs.25) “do not let this matter be evil in your eyes”
- (vs.27) “the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of Yahweh”

In verse twenty-five it is recorded that David did not want Joab to judge him as evil, but tragically, David apparently gave no thought regarding how God would view what he had done. In the last words of the verse we are given God’s evaluation, David had done evil things in Yahweh’s sight. During the story it is recorded that David had willfully violated four of the Ten Commandments:

- Murder (6th)
- Adultery (7th)
- False testimony (9th)
- Coveting (10th)

This closing observation serves as the hinge of the broader story, setting up the transition to God’s response to David’s sins. This makes it clear that the troubles that follow in David’s family (as recorded in chapters 12-20), were God’s judgment upon him for the sins he committed in this chapter.

Conclusion:

In the Book of James, we read:

“But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”

James 1:14-15

The story of David and Bathsheba is an illustration of the truth expressed in those verses. This is a story of uncontrolled sexual passion, a preoccupation with self over others, and consequences of the abuse of power. This story functions as a warning, that anyone, no matter how faithful they have been in the past, can fall into terrible sin. It is also a story about grace. The story of David’s life prior to this chapter was not a story about everything that David had accomplished because of his virtue. It was a story about what God in His grace had accomplished through David. Now with this chapter, the story of grace continues. God will continue to be with David. Not because David was worthy, but because God is faithful to His promises.

At the conclusion of the chapter, it would have appeared outwardly that David was going to escape punishment for his sins. But the final portion of verse twenty-seven sets the stage for the pronouncement of judgment that comes in the next chapter. And as the story of David continues, it will reveal how the judgment of God was unleashed on the life of David so that he would experience the bitter fruit of his sins. These chapters teach that the silence of God should not be equated with the absence of God, and that in the end, no one gets escapes accountability for their sins, not even God’s own people. And as the chapters unfold, we are reminded that we are all in need of God’s grace, for without it, no one could ever be forgiven.