



Nathan Admonishing David, Rembrandt (1606-1669), reed-pen and bistre wash, c. 1654-55

I GREW UP WITH LITTLE GOLDEN BOOKS, little cardboard-covered children's books that cost 25 cents in most grocery stores when I was a kid, and which are still around today, although probably not for 25 cents. Besides *The Pokey Little Puppy* and *The Little Red Hen*, there were religious-themed Little Golden Books. My sister, who frequents collectibles shops, sent me a stack of these as a nostalgic reminder of our childhood and as a nod to the fact that I was a pastor. Among them was this one: *Heroes of the Bible*.ⁱ Right on the cover is King David, clean-shaven and angelically playing the harp.

After you hear this morning's passage from Second Samuel, you'll wonder whether the Little Golden Books folks ever read that particular story.

Some background: As we saw last week in the Book of Joshua, God freed the people Israel from slavery in Egypt, and after 40 years of wandering they crossed the Jordan into Canaan, where they settled down. Well, sort of. The Book of Judges, which

follows Joshua, recounts Israel's pattern of turning to idolatry, facing the consequences, crying out to God, and being delivered by divinely appointed judges before falling back into corruption. Those judges included Samson, as in Samson and Delilah, Gideon, and Deborah, among others. But then, in First Samuel, the people demand a king. They sound to me a bit like a whining teenager: All the other countries have a king; why can't we?ⁱⁱ The prophet Samuel warns them: Kings are takers. The king will take your sons, your daughters, your fields, your produce, your servants, your herds, your flocks.ⁱⁱⁱ But the people insist, and Samuel anoints Israel's first king, King Saul.^{iv} Saul doesn't work out,^v so God sends Samuel to Jesse and his eight sons, and the youngest, the shepherd boy David, is the one God chooses as the next king.^{vi} At this point, Saul is still on the throne, so that creates quite a rivalry between Saul and David.

Saul dies in battles.^{vii} Here in Second Samuel, David has taken the throne. David becomes the King by which all of Israel's future kings are measured. But in today's passage, we see the dark side of David, and through this story, Samuel's warning rings out loud and clear: Kings are takers. The king will take your sons, your daughters, your fields, your produce, your servants, your herds, your flocks. Not a bad reminder as we head into an election.

2 Samuel 11:1-5

David and Bathsheba

11 In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.

²One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, ³and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite." ⁴Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness.) Then she went back home. ⁵The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, "I am pregnant."

2 Samuel 11:26-27

²⁶When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. ²⁷After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the Lord.

2 Samuel 12:1-9

Nathan Rebukes David

12 The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, ³but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴"Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

⁵ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! ⁶ He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

⁷ Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. ⁸ I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more."

⁹ Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.

I WANT TO GET ONE THING OUT OF THE WAY: This passage about David and Bathsheba is not about sex, and it isn't even about adultery in any way we would define it today. You can't call it cheating on your husband if you don't have a choice, and you can't call it cheating on your wife if you have multiple wives and concubines in your harem. David had at least eight wives and at least ten concubines.^{viii} The only way this is adultery is in the 1,000 B.C.E. context, which is that David violated Uriah's property rights in his wife.^{ix}

Older interpretations of this passage like to implicate Bathsheba. She was just so beautiful and so alluring that David couldn't help himself. In 2026, we understand these dynamics a little better. It doesn't matter what a woman wears, where she walks alone at night or whether she bathes naked on the roof. She is not "asking for it." It doesn't matter whether David was charming, and it doesn't matter whether Bathsheba tried to fight him off. When the king orders his messengers to go get a woman and bring her to his bedroom, this is not a seduction; it's certainly not a love scene.^x Bathsheba had no say in what happened next. The power difference between David and Bathsheba means there is no way there could be anything approaching mutual consent.

Okay, so I am not going to talk about sex or adultery anymore, this morning - or at least not much more - because this is about power. This story is about abuse of power.

Some details of this story might be lost in the formal biblical language. The timing of Bathsheba's ritual purification is mentioned because it means no one but David could be the father of her child. This is why David panics and sends for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, a soldier in David's army. He tells Uriah to go home to rest from battle, assuming Uriah will make love to his wife and when the child is born, everyone will believe it's his.^{xi} But Uriah, ever loyal to the king, refuses to go home. The next day, David tries getting Uriah drunk, figuring that will loosen his resolve.^{xii} But that doesn't work, either. So David hatches the most despicable of plots, sending Uriah to the front line of a battle and specifically instructing his commander to make sure Uriah is left unprotected, "so that he may be struck down and die."^{xiii} Which is what happens. A few verses beyond where we read today, we hear David's very cynical response to the news that Uriah is dead. "Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another."^{xiv} In other words, "People die in battle all the time. No big deal."

David saw something he wanted, and he took it. Just as the prophet Samuel warned: Kings are takers. King David is now in control and can have whatever he wants. So he takes it. When it looks as though there might be repercussions, he ruthlessly arranges a cover-up. Bathsheba doesn't matter; Uriah doesn't matter.

That is the definition of abuse of power: When someone - an individual, nation, corporation, religious or ethnic or any other group - says, "I'm going to get what I want and I don't care about you." There is no aspect of life untouched by the abuse of power: business, the workplace, the schoolyard, politics, international relationships, personal relationships, parenting, policing, the church - you name it. We all have seen power go to people's heads. One word for these people is bullies.

In the 19th century, John Dalberg-Acton said, "Power tends to corrupt. Absolute power corrupts absolutely." Many studies and psychological experiments seem to support a theory that we all try to get away with as much as we can, and that the only thing that keeps us in check are rules and punishments. One such study was the Stanford prison experiment. During the summer of 1971, twenty-four male students were randomly assigned roles of prisoner and guard in a mock prison in the basement of the Stanford Psychology Department. They were supposed to be studying whether the brutality reported among guards in American prisons was due to the sadistic personalities of the guards or had more to do with the prison environment. The participants adapted so well to their roles that some of the guards ultimately subjected some of the prisoners to psychological torture. Two of the prisoners quit the study early, and what was supposed to be a two-week experiment was abruptly stopped after only six days because of the objections of a woman graduate student.^{xv}

People conclude from studies like this that the only way power won't corrupt is to have checks and balances, whether it's a grad student who says, "This is getting out of hand," or a spouse who says, "You're being too hard on the kids," or legislators who ask a President to justify starting a war. This is why it's dangerous when leaders surround themselves only with people who agree with them. This is why it's dangerous to exclude the press because you don't like what they report.

Checks and balances, rules, and individuals and communities that help people stay on track: these are indeed good things. Important things. But there is other research that shows that something Abraham Lincoln said is actually true: "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

When people are successful, and especially when they become truly powerful, too often they start believing they got there on their own. But no one gets where they are alone. Parents, access to education, a mentor or a team, economic privilege, advantages of all sorts and even luck land people in power. Power is given as much as taken, and if power is to continue, the people underneath you have to be willing to allow you to remain in power. So as it turns out in these other studies, people who recognize that their achievements are due not only to their own talent, hard work, or cleverness, but also to the help and support of other people, don't participate in corruption. Corruption is a byproduct when a person in power is arrogant instead of grateful.

David forgot who he was and how he got there. He forgot whose he was – God's own man. Would this troubling story even be in Scripture if David had been grateful to God and to the people who were counting on him, rather than arrogant?

There's also research showing that power actually brings out the best in some people.^{xvi} These experiments reveal that power doesn't corrupt, after all; it heightens pre-existing ethical tendencies. If a person is inclined to dirty tricks, shady business, or megalomania, more power makes that more apparent. Which makes you wonder whether, as someone put it, power doesn't corrupt; it's just that power attracts the corruptible.^{xvii}

So there are a couple of small lessons there. Practicing gratitude is an antidote to the arrogance that encourages power to corrupt. And power doesn't corrupt everybody. In an article about another kind of hero, author Joshua Rivera explored why the comic book and movie character Superman is less popular and more misunderstood than some of the darker, more conflicted comic book heroes. People say Superman is too perfect, a goody-two-shoes, just not very interesting. Rivera says the Superman stories are great because they're never really about him. They're about us. Rivera writes, "Superman isn't good or special because he's an alien who crashes on Earth and ends up being incredibly powerful. He's special because after all that he becomes someone who always does the right thing because he was raised by a couple of decent people from Kansas. That's it. ... He is someone with the power to be the most selfish being in all of existence, and he decides to be selfless because he was raised by a couple of kindly farmers. And the beautiful idea behind him is that we don't need to be bulletproof to be that way – we just have to be decent people."^{xviii}

These are good lessons, but I can't help but think there has to be a better message here than, "Don't be like David. Be grateful. Be decent." Of course, if everybody were grateful and decent what a wonderful world it would be, right? But where is God in this? Where is the grace in David's story?

There is grace in the truth that people can change. We can't know for certain how King David changed after being confronted by Nathan, but Psalm 51 is supposed to be David's response. "Create in me a clean heart," David prays, "and renew a right spirit within me."^{xix}

And there is grace in the truth that God can accomplish God's purposes even through a flawed character like David; even through a tragedy like the abuse of power we see in today's story. It wasn't that long ago that few people outside the Black community were paying attention to the fact that Black Americans have long been the large majority of unarmed people killed in police encounters. Then, because of the tragic deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, and others, more and more people with privilege are aware and appalled and seeking to address this injustice. That's why a "Black Lives Matter" banner hangs on the outside of this church. It's there to help us remember a power we might forget we have – the power to ignore injustices that don't impact us directly. And it is there to announce we are committed to standing in solidarity with people still struggling for equal power.

The grace in this story of David's folly, then, is that we aren't stuck with this story. God transforms this story, and God transforms us. There is grace in knowing that this narrative, the narrative of abuse of power and the inevitability that power corrupts, is not the narrative we inherit as God's people. In fact, in Jesus, we are given a powerful contradiction to this story: Jesus, who teaches and lives so clearly the power of love, the one power that actually changes people for the better.

Was King David the "hero of the Bible" that the Little Golden Book says he is? I confess I have a hard time swallowing that. But through his heartbreaking story we learn an important truth that is our story, and that applies as much to us as to any king, any hero. As Stan Lee, the author and artist of the Spiderman comic book series, wrote, "With great power, comes great responsibility."^{xx} Jesus said the same thing: "From the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."^{xxi}

Jesus knew this. Spiderman knew this. May it be so for me and for you, all you heroes here at Calvary. Amen.

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- ⁱ Jane Werner Watson, *Heroes of the Bible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955); illustrations by Rachel Taft Dixon and Marjorie Hartwell.
- ⁱⁱ 1 Samuel 8:4-9.
- ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Samuel 8:10-18.
- ^{iv} 1 Samuel 10:9-27.
- ^v 1 Samuel 15:1-35.
- ^{vi} 1 Samuel 16:6-13.
- ^{vii} 1 Samuel 31:1-6.
- ^{viii} David's 8 wives: Michal, Saul's daughter: 1 Samuel 18:27; 2 Samuel 3:13-16; Ahinoam of Jezreel: 1 Samuel 25:43; 27:3; 2 Samuel 3:2; Abigail, widow of Nabal: 1 Samuel 25:39-42; 2 Samuel 3:3; Maacah, daughter of the king of Geshur: 2 Samuel 3:3; Haggith: 2 Samuel 3:4; Abital: 2 Samuel 3:4; Eglah: 2 Samuel 3:5; Bathsheba: 2 Samuel 11:27; 12:24. David's concubines: 2 Samuel 15:16 is the source of the number. When David fled Jerusalem during Absalom's revolt, he left ten concubines behind to keep the house; 2 Samuel 5:13 says David took "more concubines and wives" in Jerusalem after leaving Hebron, with no number given.
- ^{ix} Many of the sources that describe this incident as "adultery" focus on Uriah as the injured party. See, for example, Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year B* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), p. 354: "It is a story of David's sins against Uriah and thus against the Lord. ... Given Israel's patriarchal perspective, adultery was a violation against her husband.
- ^x Incredibly, the 1951 movie, "David and Bathsheba," (starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward) characterizes this as a love story. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_and_Bathsheba_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_and_Bathsheba_(film))
- ^{xi} 2 Samuel 11:6-11.
- ^{xii} 2 Samuel 11:12-13.
- ^{xiii} 2 Samuel 11:14-15.
- ^{xiv} 2 Samuel 11:25.
- ^{xv} Romesh Ratnesar "The Menace Within," July/August 2011, https://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article_id=40741.
- ^{xvi} Christopher Shea, "Why Power Corrupts," October 2012, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/why-power-corrupts-37165345/?no-ist>.
- ^{xvii} David Brin, scientist and author.
- ^{xviii} Joshua Rivera, "Hollywood Is Missing the One Thing that Makes Superman Great," July 13, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/no-one-gets-superman-anymore-2015-7>.
- ^{xix} Psalm 51:10.
- ^{xx} Stan Lee, creator of the Spider-man comic character, *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (August 1962), the first Spider-Man story, and in later stories and adaptations.
- ^{xxi} Luke 12:48.

