

The Ugly, the Bad and the Good

2 Samuel 11 and 12

Over the past six weeks we've been looking at some of the lesser known characters in the Old Testament story, who we've referred to as "people on the edge". In each of these stories we've seen grace at work - God intervening in sometimes remarkable and unusual ways.

Now, you may be familiar with the story of the good, the bad and the ugly – one of the most famous cowboy movies of all time starring American actor Clint Eastwood – but today I want to tell you the story of the ugly, the bad and the good.

The UGLY

2 Samuel 11:1-17

We're going to look at this story through the eyes of Bathsheba – who we are told is anything but ugly, in fact she is not just beautiful but very beautiful. Perhaps it was this that first caught the attention of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband.

Uriah was a Hittite; one of this family of foreigners who had made their home amongst the people of Israel. Uriah was also a warrior, one of the king of Israel's elite fighters, part of this group known as 'the thirty', renown for their exploits in battle.

Perhaps we could call these two the bold and the beautiful.

As our story starts Bathsheba is alone, again. Uriah is once more off with Israel's army – this time it is the Ammonites that are in view as Joab, Uriah's commander, and the rest of the army seek to finish the job they started last year, when they defeated but had not destroyed the Ammonites, a war initiated after the Ammonites' new king had rejected peace with Israel and formed an alliance with the Arameans to attack them.

But back in Jerusalem, far away from the sounds of battle, in the cool of the evening Bathsheba is taking a bath, washing away the grim and dust of another day under the heat of the Middle Eastern sun. She could not realize however that her actions did not go unobserved. From the roof of the palace with its commanding views of all the city, the King of Israel, was feeling restless, as he paced the roof perhaps he wondered how the war was faring, perhaps he reflected on his own diminishing physical capabilities, middle-age was upon him, was he the man he once was?

And as he walked he spotted out of the corner of his eye a woman, not just any woman, a very beautiful woman. And the glance become a look, and the look became a lingering look, and the lingering look became an idea, and the idea became an action... and before long Bathsheba was running home through the Jerusalem night after having slept with the king of Israel. What emotions must have raced through her body – terror at being discovered, shame at her indiscretion, a twinge of excitement over this palace liaison perhaps, and then guilt at even considering that?

Now, that could have been the end of it – a one-night stand, a guilty little secret.

But that wasn't the end of it because of three simple words – I am pregnant.

How must have Bathsheba felt as the realization dawned of what that brief encounter with the king had achieved. A baby, what she had desired for so long, now realized. But at what cost? At the cost of her life? Who would believe her that it was the King who was responsible. She would be accused of unfaithfulness to her

husband, condemned for sure and put to death as the law required. She was desperate. There was no option. She had to send word to the King.

The King for his part acted swiftly. His secret could still be safe. All it needed was a simple little deception.

He sent for Uriah from the front lines, on the pretense of wanting news of the battle. After quickly dismissing Uriah's battlefield report the King sends Uriah home for some quality time with his wife. A little R&R after his tour of duty. The King knew if he could get Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba the baby could be passed off as Uriah's own child.

Perfect. No one needs to get hurt.

As Bathsheba sat by the window waiting for her husband to come she felt the nervousness in her throat. Would he suspect something? Did he already know? How would she react on seeing him again?

As the night wore on she became more and more convinced that she must have been found out – for she waited and waited but Uriah never came. As the pale light of dawn leaked across the sky she flung herself exhausted onto her bed, unsure what this new day would bring.

When she arose the next day one of her servants informed her that Uriah had spent the night sleeping at the entrance to the palace with the king's servants. His sense of honour and duty wouldn't allow him to enjoy the comforts of home while his comrades and his commander were continuing to face the rigors of life on the battle field.

The King became more desperate. And the ugliness started to grow. In a pathetic attempt to undermine Uriah's sense of honor, the King entertains him, plying him with wine, thinking that if he can just get Uriah drunk enough maybe he will compromise his principles

But still Bathsheba sat by the window and waited.

The King was now beside himself and desperate times called for desperate measures. There was no other option if his secret was to remain hidden. He formulates a new plan. In an ultimate ugly act, Uriah is sent back to the battle with a letter containing secret instructions for his commander. The commander follows the instructions obediently – placing Uriah in the heat of the battle then leaving him exposed to the enemy troops.

Uriah becomes just another casualty of war.

What part did Bathsheba play in all this? How much did she know of what went on behind closed doors in the palace? What rumors and gossip did she overhear? We simply do not know.

It seems that she was just a much a victim as her husband - helplessly carried along on this wave of human ugliness; this tide of lust and deceit and betrayal and murder. An object more than an actor. An all too familiar story.

After the time of mourning had passed she was taken to the palace, became the King's wife and her son was born.

Not really a happy ever after ending.

But in fact this was actually not an ending at all.

It simply brings the ugly to a close and ushers in the bad.

The BAD

2 Samuel 11:26, 27

For while the King might have thought his problems were now over, he had forgotten that in the story of our lives there is one actor who is always there even when we aren't aware of him. Sometimes silent, sometimes hidden but always involved. This actor is God, the Lord, the covenant God of Israel, the one who had placed the King on the throne and had sworn to establish the King's rule forever.

And the sort of ugliness that had gone on here never goes unnoticed by God. For this was not just a crime against humanity. This was a crime against God.

So the Lord sends his prophet, his messenger – a man named Nathan to announce to the King that he has displeased the Lord. He has despised the word of the Lord and in doing so he has despised God himself, he has shown contempt towards God.

This is the root of the ugliness that Bathsheba is caught up in. In the end all our human ugliness comes from this ugliness against God. What the bible calls sin. Going our own way. Rejecting God's authority. Setting ourselves up as the experts on what's right and wrong in our lives and the lives of others. Throughout this sordid tale of escalating ugliness, the King was acting in defiance against his God. It seems he has forgotten that it was God who took him from being a simple shepherd boy to become the King of all Israel. Ignoring all that God had already given him, the King felt justified in taking more for himself. This is a disease that affects us all.

And this sort of defiance, this sort of ugliness is not without its consequences. For the result of sin is death.

Nathan tells the King that because of the King's sin disruption would enter the King's family. One of the members of his own family would rebel against the king and sleep with his wives as a way of asserting his authority and claiming the kingship for himself. Doing in public what the King had done in private. And if we had the time we could tell that story. How the King's first born son raped his half sister. Leading her brother to murder that son in revenge. This in turn led to the murdering son being banished, only to return and lead a rebellion against the King – forcing the King to flee for this life from the capital. The King's son then slept with the King's concubines to assert his claim to the throne - just as the prophet predicted. The ugly tentacles of sin wrapped themselves around the King's family, and spread to bring the whole kingdom into turmoil.

But for Bathsheba there was a much more personal and much more painful consequence.

As the prophet left the King's palace, Bathsheba felt the baby in her arms go limp. Something was wrong – he shouldn't be this hot, he shouldn't be this pale. The King shut himself in his room refusing to eat, pleading to God for the baby to be spared but it was all of no use. On the 7th day of his illness the child died – another innocent victim of his father's sin.

Bathsheba wept – what else could she do? Her son was gone. The one good thing to have come out of this horrible, ugly situation and now that was gone too. Sin had robbed her of her dignity, her husband, and now her baby. Ugly sin had been nothing but bad news for Bathsheba.

The GOOD

But I said this story was about the ugly the bad and the good – where is the good?

2 Samuel 12:24, 25

As Bathsheba mourned – the King came and comforted her (now there's a euphemism if ever I heard one!). And in time she fell pregnant again.

She gave birth to another son. Now the birth of another child didn't suddenly make everything okay. It's not as if this son could replace all that she has lost – nothing could ever do that.

But in who this child was, the who this child was to become we see God weaving the threads of the tragedies of life to bring good out of bad as he so often seems to do.

For I wonder if there was some fear mixed with excitement as Bathsheba held her new born baby in her arms. What would happen to this child? Would the Lord take him away too??

As if to confirm her fears, Nathan the prophet enters the room – did Bathsheba's heart skip a beat or two or three as Nathan approached the King. Was this another pronouncement of judgment? Must the punishment continue? Surely she had suffered enough?

Now they had already given the baby a name, but when Nathan finally opened his mouth to speak, he gave the baby a new name: you shall call him Jedidiah because the LORD loves him. (For, as I'm sure you know, Jedidiah means loved by the Lord).

I think Bathsheba probably breathed a sign of relief.

Loved by the Lord – a name full of promise and hope. The child of this unlikely, illegal and illegitimate union between the King and Bathsheba becomes the one who is loved by the Lord. Here is grace at work. God choosing to bring something good out of an ugly and bad situation.

For Jedidiah, or Solomon as he became more commonly known, grew and in time become the one to take his father's place on the throne. With a little bit of help from our old friend Nathan the prophet and a little bit of a push from Bathsheba his mum, the King, King David, as he lies on his deathbed, announces that Solomon is to be crowned king.

And so Bathsheba, the stolen wife, becomes the King's mother. Given a place of prominence and honour amidst all of the kingdom. And her son, Solomon became the greatest king of Israel, known throughout the world for his wisdom and his riches.

God had brought something good out of the ugly and the bad.

But that is not quite the end of our story.

For this child who became the greatest king of Israel, he had a son, who had a son, who had a son also, on through the generations until a man named Joseph who was the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

And this Jesus, this Christ, had his own experience of the ugly, the bad and the good.

His life was unique in that he himself was completely free from any trace of ugliness, he lived a perfect life of beauty and truth – something no human had ever done before or since. He was so full of the things of God that his early followers decided he must in fact be God. An incredible claim yet one he himself endorsed.

But this perfect man who was somehow God - was killed on a cross – experiencing the full brunt of human ugliness – mocking and hatred and jealousy and torture and murder. This was the ultimate expression of the ugly.

And somehow on the cross God loaded up on Jesus all of the bad. All the consequences of human ugliness – all the punishment for human sin and the havoc that it wrecks in our lives was soaked up by Jesus on the cross - so that we would no longer have to bear its consequences forever.

And then out of this ugly and this bad God brought amazing good - He raised Jesus to life again. Defeating all that was ugly and bad by defeating their ultimate ally death. God raised Jesus to life as the forerunner, the first one to enter the new life that he has promised to give to all who will give themselves fully to him.

So through the death and the resurrection of Jesus – God has made it possible for us to put aside the ugly in our lives, to escape from full impact of the endless cycle of bad consequences and instead be free to experience the good life lived with Jesus now and forever. Not that the ugly and bad won't still happen but that God will be working to bring the good out of whatever ugly we might experience.

The story of Bathsheba, and the story of each of the People on the Edge we have looked at over this last six weeks, is part of God's great story of bringing good out of the ugly and the bad. From the redemption of the slave woman Hagar to the unloved Leah discovering the God who loves her; from the desperate Tamar finding that righteousness may wear unusual disguises to the foreigner Jael bringing deliverance to God's people, and finally from a destitute widow expressing daily faith to the stolen wife who becomes not just the mother of the king, but an ancestor to the saviour of the world. In all of these stories we see God at work. We see God's story of salvation unfolding.

We are invited to be a part of that story too. To join our story with God's story so that the ugly and the bad in our lives too, can be transformed into the amazing good of a life lived with God.