

An Old Testament Story, a Very Modern Problem

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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The first sermon in a series of three, *The Bathsheba Syndrome: Ethical Failures of Successful Leaders*.

Text: 2Samuel 11

It was this spring, after several high-profile ethical lapses by Navy leaders—a few commanding officers and one Catholic chaplain at the Naval Academy—that Admiral Greenert sent the entire Navy flag wardroom a 1993 article, *The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders* by Dean C. Ludwig and Clinton O. Longenecker.¹ Admiral Greenert is the Vice Chief of Naval Operations with the deliciously ironic nickname of “The Vice.” After reading the article, I became fascinated with these two business school professors’ thesis about why and how successful people succumb to temptation. Of course, I loved the fact that the authors based their argument and title on the Biblical story of David and Bathsheba. I was so intrigued that I am preaching a series of three sermons on the topic. Today’s is the first, and before the three sermons are over I want to look at the reasons successful people are susceptible to moral failure and look at ways we might avoid the same mistakes. I hope you will see the series as a very practical, down-to-earth set of sermons. At least that is my goal.

Why do leaders at the top of their game lose focus, slip into temptation and disgrace themselves? More to the point, why do heretofore ethical leaders so often lose their way after they reach a high degree of success? It is so common; I dare say everyone in the room knows at least one example of a business person, a minister, a military or political leader who has disgraced him or herself in ethical failure. We start the series by looking at the Biblical story that gives us the title and by defining what is meant by *The Bathsheba Syndrome*. I say at the outset, I am not completely happy with the series’ name. Hearing it, you may think I blame the woman for King David’s sin. I do not. But had I called it *The David Syndrome*, you might think I was talking about myself. My concern is the successful person like David and ethical leadership.

King David at the time of the story had achieved several stunning successes in war, nation building and diplomacy. He had a mesmerizing, charismatic personality, was heroically successful in war and politics, and possessed a deep faith and a very clear moral compass. His vision for his nation, combined with his gifts and God’s call, brought him to the pinnacle of power. He came from humble origin to great triumph, and at that moment the future was clearly his. Yet he nearly destroyed himself and his nation because he could not control his desire for

¹ Ludwig, Dean C. and Longenecker, Clinton O. *Journal of Business Ethics*: Apr 1993. Research Library, 265-273.

another man's wife. He knew better! We see in his Psalms, David possessed a strong faith and clear ethical values. What happened and why do so many others like David make similar mistakes in their success? That is the question. But more, is there something peculiar about success itself which can cause leaders like David to stumble?

2Samuel tells us this happened in the spring of the year, "when kings go out to battle."² Why was King David not out in the field with his men? Instead he had been napping late in the afternoon and went out to walk on the roof of the palace, high above the other, more modest dwellings in Jerusalem. The picture is of a successful leader who should have been elsewhere, but was lazing about. David espied a very beautiful woman bathing on her roof below. She was Bathsheba, a Jewish woman married to Uriah, a Hittite and a soldier in David's army. Knowing Uriah was off fighting the King's wars, David sent for her and began an affair. David involved his servants in his duplicity, sending them for her. He must have believed he could control the situation and that no one would ever find out what he did with this woman. Things went as he hoped until she became pregnant. To cover his sin, he sent for Uriah to return from the front under the guise of bringing David information about the battle. He believed that Uriah would sleep with his wife while back in Jerusalem and thus cover the King's guilt. But Uriah declined since none of his comrades at the front could do so with their wives. David threw a party to get the soldier inebriated, hoping Uriah would have less control of his scruples if he were tipsy. That didn't work either. David then sent Uriah back to the front carrying the message of his own doom. The letter ordered General Joab to set up a situation where Uriah would be killed in battle. It came to pass, just as the King wanted. When the report got back to David about the loss of life in this battle and word of Uriah's death, it is telling what the King told the messenger to say to his General: "Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; press your attack on the city, and overthrow it."³ Again, here is a king who thought he could control the situation. And why not? He had loyal servants and even generals who did his bidding and asked no questions.

As soon as Bathsheba finished the required mourning for her slain husband, and not a moment later, David sent for her and married her. The period was only a few months, because the text tells us she delivered their child *after* she had married David. Now, let us count the commandments David broke in this episode: adultery, murder, coveting another man's wife, and false witness. At least four! But 2Samuel then tells us, "the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent [the prophet] Nathan to him."⁴ The prophet had found out the truth, perhaps through court or soldier's gossip. In any case many must have thought the timing of the

² 2Samuel 11:1.

³ 2Samuel 11:25.

⁴ 2Samuel 11:27b-12:1.

King's marriage to the late Uriah's wife scandalous. Nathan minced no words and confronted the King with his sin.⁵ To his credit, David repented and begged for God's forgiveness.⁶

Here is a story, though ancient, with many modern parallels. In business and church, in the military and in politics, so many leaders have followed David's path. Successful leaders trip over the perquisites of their power and influence, giving into temptation, trying to cover it up, and foundering in the wake of their own misdeeds. Could David's fall have been prevented? Could the many modern Davids' falls be prevented? Ludwig and Longenecker report that ethics courses in the nation's business schools are aware of this problem and many have begun teaching ethics to head off this very problem. However, far too often, they say, these courses presume that those who stumble *lack morality* or that they abandon their standards in the face of *stiff competitive business pressures*. But David's story reveals something else. Here was a man who had plenty of morals. He knew what he was doing was wrong because he hid it in secret, from all but his few loyal servants. Nor does a man taking a nap in the afternoon when he should have been on the battlefield appear to be a man struggling with overbearing competitive pressures. It is David's very accomplishments that seem to have created in him the seeds of his destruction. The successful face a different set of temptations cultivated by their influence, power, and prosperity. Ludwig and Longenecker "... debunk the notion that the ethical failure of our leaders is largely due to lack of principle and/or the tough competitive climate."⁷

I am more acquainted with how the church handles such cases. We typically hold courses for our ministers and train them in 'boundary keeping.' In fact that is another coincidence about this topic and my reading Ludwig and Longenecker's article this spring. I took just such a course just this past year. But the problem is not our lack of knowledge. We know these behaviors are wrong. Something else is the matter when successful leaders overstep the bounds and violate those they should protect and respect.

Next week, I will develop David's problems in success more fully, but let me briefly today point out what the story tells us about the pitfalls of a successful leader. First, David had taken his eye off the ball. He was disengaged in his wars, napping and idle, when he should have been elsewhere. Ludwig and Longenecker say he lost *strategic focus in his success*.⁸ Second, David's success gained him *privileged access*. This is symbolized in the story by his seeing Bathsheba bathing. While privileged access is inevitable, it is granted to leaders to give them insight to lead effectively. How often has privileged access to information or people led to a fall?

⁵ 2Samuel 12:1-10.

⁶ 2Samuel 1:13-23. The first child of their union died, but David and Bathsheba went on to become parents of his successor, King Solomon.

⁷ Ludwig and Longenecker. *Op cit.*, 266.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 268.

Third, David's success led to a false belief he could *control outcomes*. He could not. The truth became known as it always does.

Again, Ludwig and Longenecker:

Look at the list of men and women who have fallen victim to these violations. Very often they are not individuals sitting in the middle of a competitive pressure cooker, making miscalculations in the heat of battle. Nor are they necessarily 'destructive achievers,' individuals devoid of operational principles who have climbed to the top in brutal pursuit of personal achievement. Far too often the leaders who have been accused and convicted of violations are men and women of generally strong principle who have built careers based more on service than self-gratification. In short, too many of the perpetrators of the violations we have recently witnessed are men and women of strong personal integrity and intelligence—men and women who have climbed the ladder through hard work and 'keeping their noses clean.' But just at the moment of seemingly 'having it all,' they have thrown it all away by engaging in an activity which is wrong, which they know is wrong, which they know would lead to their downfall if discovered, and which they mistakenly believe they have the power to conceal. This, in essence, is what we have labeled the *Bathsheba Syndrome*.⁹

It appears that the principles of a leader are abandoned not because of competitive pressure but because of something peculiar to success. How is success related to ethical failure? In the next sermon, I will look at what we learn from the story in 2Samuel. Then on Nov. 7th, in the last sermon in the series, I will look at several practical strategies for successful people to avoid David's mistakes.

End

Bathsheba Syndrome 1. DOC

⁹ *Ibid.*, 267.