

The Great Fall of a Great Man

The old saying is that the bigger they come, the harder they fall. That's true in sport and in battle. It is also true in the Christian life. People of great ability and great spirituality are also prone to great and terrifying falls in the opposite direction. Satan himself was an anointed cherub, an exalted angelic power of enormous wisdom, beauty and authority.

That's why Satan so often targets spiritual leaders. When they fall, they often fall into drastic and depraved sin, as we've recently seen with famous apologists. Not a month goes by without some headline of a celebrity pastor caught in some kind of sexual scandal. These falls are no doubt prized by the Enemy, because they are public, they involve someone that others looked up to, and they are usually terrible falls.

Fortunately these are not something new. The Bible has never hidden the faults of God's people away from us. We see the great failures of Abraham and Jacob, and Moses, and Peter. And perhaps no one's fall, besides the fall of Adam is as well-known as David's fall. Second Samuel 11 is the Great Fall of a Great Man.

But the Bible does not give us these accounts to humiliate the man in question, or to give us a kind of self-righteous head-shaking moment. It gives us these accounts so that we are warned and instructed about how sin progresses in all of us. It is there to show us that if people of great spiritual stature can fall, we should be humble, dependent, and careful. As 1 Corinthians 10:12 puts it, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."

In this passage we'll see the progress of temptation and sin in the life of a great man. We'll see it all the way from its beginning to its deadly finish. We'll track six stages in David's temptation: sedation, inclination, consideration, participation, deception, and destruction.

I. Spiritual Sedation

2 Samuel 11:1 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.

We meet David in this chapter as a man in mid-life. He has been on the throne for somewhere around 15 to 20 years; he is somewhere between 45 and 50. He has reached that dangerous place where many find themselves in mid-life: having achieved many or most of his goals, experiencing success on every side, living in relative wealth and prosperity. He has reached that perilous place of blessing and success where hard work is an option, not a necessity. He has had such success that he can send Joab to complete the campaign against the Ammonites who had insulted him.

It is no accident that the writer tells us that when kings *usually* go out to battle, David remained at Jerusalem. David was supposed to be leading the charge against the Ammonites, supposed to be there with armour and sword and shield. So, instead of remaining vigilant, maintaining a disciplined life, David now takes his ease, even while there are battles to be fought. David relaxes his vigilance and his discipline, and when that is done in one area, it is soon showing up in other areas too. He is spiritually sedate, lowering his guard.

Rest so as to recuperate is one thing. Taking your ease when there are important responsibilities is presumption, pride. Idle hands are the devil's workshop, the saying goes.

By being spiritually sedate, David is already in a dangerous place. Samuel Johnson said, "If you are idle, be not solitary; if you are solitary, be not idle." Being idle is spiritually dangerous, so is being solitary for too long. Combining them is a deadly combination. Ironically, David would have been safer on the battlefield than on the rooftop of his house.

Christian, for the sake of your marriage, your purity, your career, your reputation, don't take off your spiritual armour and descend into bored, solitary idleness, with no one to serve, no spiritual disciplines to cultivate, nothing good to be done. It is a breeding ground for sin and corruption. You may rest, but you may never give up spiritual vigilance and a life of discipline.

And as so often happens, the man letting down his guard against temptation finds temptation.

II. Inclination

² 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.

David's palace was built at the top of Mount Zion, so his house would have overlooked houses beneath his in Jerusalem. He had what we would call a roof patio, where he would probably have meetings, and also just relax and survey the city. It's springtime, it's warm and pleasant, and the idle king gets up from a nap and takes a stroll on his roof, probably with a golden cup of wine in hand.

From his vantage point, he sees a woman bathing. The Bible doesn't often tell you how beautiful someone was, but when it says she was very beautiful, it means she was unusually attractive.

Now it is hard to judge whether Bathsheba was being deliberately seductive or not. It is possible that she was bathing in an enclosed courtyard, and that it was only because of David's vantage point that he could see her. On the other hand, as anyone knows, if I can see you, then you can see me. If you can see the whites of someone's eyes while you are changing clothes, then he or she can see you changing clothes. This is not rocket science. We know she is alone because her husband is at the battlefield.

She may be innocent of being a seductress, or she may not. But what is fairly clear is that she wasn't being careful. She did not make sure that she would not be a source of lust to someone else. If the man lusts, it is his fault, and his sin, and he must answer for it. But if she sought to be sexually alluring, then she has not loved her neighbour. Immodesty is a kind of selfishness: a willingness to tempt many men to sin, all for the aim of baiting the desired fish. Modesty is a carefulness that regards my neighbour, not wanting to be part of the reason why someone falls into sin.

David at this moment is in the inclination phase of temptation. He sees a beautiful woman. There is no sin in that. Her beauty is compelling and pleasant, no sin in that yet. But this is the crucial moment when temptation can still be refused. He has an inclination, a curiosity, but it is still a temptation. He has a choice to linger there and keep looking. As Spurgeon said about thoughts, there is no sin if birds fly over your head; there is sin if you allow them to make a nest in your hair.

The inclination phase of temptation is when we have the best chance of escaping the temptation: ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear *it*. (1 Cor. 10:13)

The door of escape narrows the longer we linger in a temptation. Joseph had the right idea when Potiphar's wife grabbed him, he literally fled, leaving his coat in her hands. Paul commands in 1 Cor 6:18: Flee sexual immorality; and again in 2 Timothy 2:22 Flee also youthful lusts.

What should David have done? He might have remembered the multiple commands in the law that forbade uncovering the nakedness of someone not your spouse. He might have remembered that when Noah's sons saw him naked, Shem and Japheth took a coat and walked backwards and covered him. He could have fled with his eyes.

If it was an accidental temptation on her part, he could have seen her and thought, "She should be more careful" and turned away. If she was being deliberately seductive, he should have looked at her and thought, "Sad. I wonder how her father raised her. I wonder what her mother taught her. I wonder why she'd do that to find happiness".

That's exactly the Christian response when the picture of the scantily-clad beautiful woman flashes on your screen, or the not-clothed-at-all flashes on your screen. You remember: this is a person, not an object. Her nakedness doesn't belong to my eyes. I don't know what went wrong with her life, but that belongs to a covenant spouse, not to me. And then you click out, close the screen. Or if it's the mall, you then bounce your eyes, and pray for her as your neighbour.

Unfortunately David didn't flee, he didn't remember and quote Scripture to himself. He didn't remember the words of Job, "I have made a covenant with my eyes; Why then should I look upon a young woman? (Job 31:1) Instead, David moved onto the next phase of temptation.

III. Consideration

³ 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?"

David's look became a stare, and the stare became a leer. Now what had been no sin became a sin, as he gave in to lust. He was not merely noticing the pleasantness of her beauty and then moving on. He had now begun to break the tenth commandment: to covet his neighbour's wife. Discontent with his wives (plural!), combined with sinful imagination now had him under the spell of lust. Jesus told us that this already constitutes adultery. ²⁷ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ "But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt. 5:27-28)

When the spell of lust takes hold, forgetfulness of God grows. It's not that you hate God in those moments; it's that He seems very far away, very unreal. All that you've known and heard and loved and believed from Scripture about purity seems to fade, and all that takes hold is a growing momentum that desires pleasure.

David has already given his heart permission to lust, so now he begins to toy with the temptation. The forbidden has become fascinating. So he sends and inquires. He is actually willing to ask other people in his court about who this woman is, involve them, let them know that he is lusting for her. Just as someone does when he Googles someone so as to lust, you're telling some very rich people in California who own Google and keep records of all your information, that you'd like to spend time looking at the body of that actress or actor, or maybe some random, anonymous face and body.

The answer comes back. This is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah. Here is another firebreak to possibly stop David's lust, another door of escape that God is providing. She is someone's *daughter*, and someone's *wife*. She is in fact, the daughter of Eliam, which makes her the granddaughter of Ahithophel, one of David's closest counselors. She is the wife of Uriah, one of the David's mighty men, one of the thirty. Uriah is a Hittite, but he has a Hebrew name, so he is probably a convert, and one of David's best men.

God has just put another padlock on this door that David is pushing to open. She belongs to another man by covenant. “David, you have daughters, do you want any of them to be an adulteress, to be hunted by an adulterer?” David has already sinned, but he could stop right there. He could confess the lust of his heart and drop the whole thing. He could thank God for the warnings and padlocks God placed to protect him.

I hope you place some padlocks in your life to guard against lust and infidelity. Some kind of accountability software on your computer or phone that keeps you honest. Or a rule about letting your spouse know where you are. Not cultivating close friendships with members of the opposite sex if you are married. Putting your laptop in places where the screen can be seen by others. Maybe making your phone always accessible to your spouse, and not deleting the history.

It's not about creating fences around God's word. It just means you make it more complicated for yourself to have to go through with a sin. If you are determined, none of those will help. But if you wish to obey, then they can slow you down and perhaps turn you around.

But sadly, that didn't happen for David. Part of the reason for that is that in this area of his life, David was already disobedient. Not in the way he was about to be, but in a secondary way. In Deuteronomy 17, God commanded Israel that when its kings took the throne, there were three things they were not to do: they were not to accumulate gold and silver, they were not to accumulate horses and chariots, and they were not to accumulate wives. But by this time, David is already married to Ahinoam, Abigail, Maacah, Haggith, Abital, Eglah. Besides that, there are unnamed concubines. Now even though this wasn't out and out adultery, polygamy was never God's plan. And as David did this, he was not learning the joys of focused marital love. He was actually feeding his lusts, and causing them to grow. And one thing about lust is that it is never satisfied. Instead of finding contentment in the next wife, it only diminished contentment overall.

The nature of sin is the law of diminishing returns. Sin gives you pleasure, but next time, it gives you less pleasure and you have to do more to get it. You become desensitized to sin, and so it no longer shocks you and draws you like it used to. Each time, the pursuit has to be racier, more exotic, more forbidden. That's why, particularly in this area, people end up doing the bizarre, the weird, the shocking, the unspeakable, because their lust has become a burning thirst, and they are drinking seawater. The more seawater you drink, the more the salt content of the water makes you thirsty.

David didn't wake up that day and say, “I think today I'll commit adultery and murder and ruin my life.” But he had been desensitizing himself to this area of sin for a while. So when it came to consideration, once in the grip of lust, he kept going. If you go from sedation to inclination, and then reach consideration, what you have been feeding or allowing in your life will explain what happens next. For David, it was participation in sin.

IV. Participation

⁴ 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.

David sends messengers. All through this chapter, David is sending people, sending Joab, sending for this one and that one, remaining idle and sinful. As much as David tried to cover this all up, there were enough people involved already to know what David was doing.

Participation in sin. For a moment of pleasure, David is going to give up years and years of singleminded commitment. This is the madness of sin, the insanity of evil. Think of how disciplined and self-controlled David was all those years when tempted to kill Saul. Think of how he did not take revenge on Nabal, how he was so gracious to Mephibosheth, so zealous for God's honour and to build a name for God. But now he will sacrifice the eternal and the permanent on the altar of the immediate.

We don't know, and the text doesn't tell us, to what degree Bathsheba felt compelled or whether she was eager to sin in this way. Some commentators speculate that a woman in her position could not have said no, and this would have been what they call a power rape. But the Bible always spells out when a woman was compelled against her will, as we see with Amnon and Tamar just two chapters later. The Bible places the weight of guilt on David, but it is fairly likely that Bathsheba was a willing accomplice, voluntarily betraying her husband.

Why does the Bible mention that she was cleansed from her impurity? Probably two reasons. One, it meant she was at that time in the month when she was most fertile and most likely to conceive a child. Two, she would have known that, and in committing this sin with David, it may be that she had an ulterior motive. In fact, years later, recorded in 1 Kings 1:17, Bathsheba says to David that he swore an oath to her that her son would sit on the throne. It may be that she got David to make that oath that night, while blinded by passion and oblivious to reason.

Well, as always happens, the sin is over, the disappointment unspoken, the shame swallowed down, and the bitter aftertaste is beginning. Bathsheba returns to her house. But it is not only a child conceived. James 1 tells us: Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. (Jas. 1:15)

V. Deception

⁵ And the woman conceived; so she sent and told David, and said, "I *am* with child." ⁶ Then David sent to Joab, *saying*, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. ⁷ When Uriah had come to him, David asked how Joab was doing, and how the people were doing, and how the war prospered. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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?" ¹¹ 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." ¹² 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.

Once Bathsheba reports to David that she is pregnant, David begins a cover-up. According to the Mosaic law both she and he should be stoned for adultery. But David is committed to hiding his sin by deception. If he can bring Uriah home from the battlefield quickly enough, then a child born nine months later will be thought to be Uriah's.

Joab had to be suspicious when David asked for Uriah alone to be recalled from the battlefield, and Uriah himself must have been suspicious. Why call one of the Thirty Mighty Men home in the middle of a fierce siege of the city of Rabbah? And when he arrives, David just makes small talk with him: "How is Joab? How are things going? That's nice. Well, now that you're here, here's a catered meal for you and your wife, go home and enjoy it."

But Uriah is too honourable a man to do that. He senses the wrongness that there are men

sacrificing themselves on the battlefield, and living out in the open under tents, and apparently they had again taken the Ark out to battle, and it was under a tent. How can he go and relax and feast and be with his wife when all his fighting comrades are sacrificing it all for the sake of God's name? You'd think David would be convicted by the honour and discipline of this man. But he is not. All David wants at this point is for Uriah to play along and to help David cover his tracks.

There is also another possibility. With all the people in the palace who would have known David's sin, and all the gossips who would have whispered about it, combined with the suspiciousness of Uriah alone being called back, it is possible that Uriah knew and had found out about his wife's and his king's betrayal. He knows what has happened, and he won't play along with the king's little game. He knows the king is too powerful for him to challenge him, or to accuse him before the priests. He may also know that by not playing along, his life is forfeit. He will be sacrificed to cover up the king's sin. It may be that Uriah simply won't be part of the deception.

But David tries again.

¹³ 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.

David thinks that a drunk Uriah will surely give in and go to his wife. But a drunk Uriah still turns out to be a better man than a sober David, because he still refuses to go home.

David is desperately trying to cover up this sin, but it won't go away. Sin can only be covered by one Person, and that is God. Try to cover it on your own, and God will make it multiply and spring up. Moses told Israel, "and be sure your sin will find you out." (Num. 32:23)

¹³ He who covers his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes *them* will have mercy. (Prov. 28:13)

Spurgeon said, "God does not allow his children to sin successfully." Attempts to hide your sin away will only cause the rust of guilt to eat away at your soul and conscience. Trying to push it away from your mind and escape into all sorts of distractions will only cause it to spring on you when you are not looking.

God has all the time in the world and all the mercy in the world for honesty and confession. But the one running from God, hiding from God, trying to bury his skeletons in the backyard will have a bloodhound of infinite ability sniffing you out, a detective with omniscience investigating you, a tracker with omnipresence finding you and arresting you.

David's deception then went one step further.

VI. Destruction

¹⁴ In the morning it happened that David wrote a letter to Joab and sent *it* by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ So it was, while Joab besieged the city, that he assigned Uriah to a place where he knew there *were* valiant men. ¹⁷ 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.

Uriah returns, the deliverer of his own sealed death-warrant. F.B Meyer commented, "Joab must have laughed to himself when he got it. "This master of mine can sing psalms with the best; but when he wants a piece of dirty work done, he must come to me. He wants to rid himself of Uriah – I wonder why? Well, I'll help him to it. At any rate, he will not be able to say another word to me

about Abner. I shall be able to do almost as I will. He will be in my power henceforth."

Furthermore, Joab knows that David's idea for Uriah to be killed is impossible and clumsy – if all the men suddenly withdraw from Uriah, Uriah himself would withdraw, or it would seem very obvious that Uriah was targeted. Instead, Joab knows he has to sacrifice several men if David wants Uriah killed, so he puts Uriah where plenty of others will be killed. Uriah is killed, and now David's sin which begun with lust on a balcony, has now produced murder on a battlefield.

Sin will take you further than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.

¹⁸ Then Joab sent and told David all the things concerning the war, ¹⁹ and charged the messenger, saying, "When you have finished telling the matters of the war to the king, ²⁰ 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?' ²¹ '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.'"

²² So the messenger went, and came and told David all that Joab had sent by him.

²³ 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. ²⁴ "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."

Joab sends a messenger and imagines David's response. He pictures David getting angry that Joab went too near the city wall, and even quoting Scripture at him, and tells the messenger to simply say the following password that will end the king's wrath: *Uriah the Hittite is also dead.*

The messenger relates that the Ammonites charged out of the city, and the Israelites pushed them right back to the city gate, and there the archers shot and killed some of our men, including Uriah.

As it turns out, David has no anger. No, he is relieved, and sends back some soldier clichés.

²⁵ 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."

Coded language between the murderer and his assassin. "Don't worry, in war, death is indiscriminate. Keep up the good work, General. Carry on."

²⁶ When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she mourned for her husband. ²⁷ And when her mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son.

Bathsheba mourns for Uriah. Whether genuine or merely outward formal mourning, we don't know. Certainly eyebrows must have been raised when David married this widow almost immediately. And when a child came rather soon, the eyebrows must have been further raised. Of course, not for those palace aides who knew all about their master's sin, whose view of God and His Word must have been tragically harmed by the hypocrisy of David. The last phrase of this chapter sums it up.

But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.

That is the final thing to be said about sin. However you rationalise, explain it away, minimise it, blame it on others, point fingers, compare yourself with others, when that all fades away, and it is just you and the Lord, there is one verdict: sin displeases God. There is no escape from this. Sin angers the Lord.

The story isn't over, as we'll see. God is faithful to convict, and gladly David will confess, and God will cleanse, but also chasten. But the story thusfar says, "let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall." If one as great as David could fall into such sin, understand that you are made of the same stuff.

Beware of **spiritual sedation**: letting down your guard and drifting into idleness. When temptation begins and it is in the **inclination** phase, you still have the strength and the presence of mind to flee, to say no, to forsake. If you keep toying with sin and get to the **consideration** phase, sin grows stronger, it lies at the door and its desire is for you. Make no provision for sin, put some padlocks and firebreaks in your life to make that sin harder. Because after that comes **participation** in sin. If you don't confess immediately, it becomes **deception**, both of yourself and of others as you excuse it and minimise it and rationalise it and hide it. Finally, we come to the true wages of sin: **destruction**, all the pain, harm, and even death that sin brings.

As we walked through this painful story, there were probably several points in the account where you thought, "No, David, stop! Don't go any further!" That is exactly the same as the Holy Spirit convicts you and me, and tells us: here you can stop, here you can take the way of escape! Listen for it.

What if you're already into a sin like David's? Physical adultery? Or the mental adultery of pornography? There is forgiveness, there is cleansing, there is afresh start, for those who stop hiding and covering. There is help here in the Word if you want to conquer an addiction to porn. The first step is to confess to God. The second step is to come to a mature believer and ask for help to get back up and find your way out of that soul-destroying addiction. Christ has defeated all sins, including adultery, fornication, pornography. But He won't help you if you're committed to covering them up. Either you uncover them to Him and let Him cover them with His blood, or you cover them up and wait for Him to uncover them on Judgement Day.

As David himself wrote after this event: “³ When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long. ⁴ For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah ⁵ I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," And You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah (Ps. 32:3-5)