

Sunday 16th November 2025 - How To Read The Bible - Responding To What We Read

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[0 : 00] We're back with the penultimate week in our How to Read the Bible series. Dave is going to round things off for us next week. But for today, what I'd like us to think about is how the Bible can make us feel when we read it.

What kinds of emotions do certain passages evoke in us? And I think this seems important because if we believe that the Bible is God-breathed, not dictated by God, but a book through which God's breath, God's spirit can speak to us, then I imagine we do well to pay attention to the feelings, the emotions, the reactions that we have when reading it.

And so to explore this this morning, we're going to take a bit of a deeper dive into a particular story from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, from the book of 2 Samuel.

And it's an ancient story set about 3,000 years ago. And it features David, who was the then king of Israel, as he looked out over Jerusalem from the roof of his palace.

As I say, it's from 2 Samuel, from chapter 11. And here's the first few verses. So in the spring, at a time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army.

[1 : 34] They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem. One 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. And 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. Then 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. The woman conceived and sent word to David saying, I am pregnant.

So, it's the first part of the story of David and Bathsheba. A tale you may well have heard of before. And a tale which is usually summarized along the lines of, King David was looking out over the roof of his palace.

[2 : 45] He sees a woman having a bath on her rooftop. David likes the look of her. And despite the fact she's married, David sends for her. She comes over. They have sex.

And she gets pregnant. Now, often, there's a view in all this that David and Bathsheba, you know, it takes two to tango in this, shall we say.

Namely, the question arises, why was Bathsheba having a bath in view of the king, if not to attract his gaze?

It's almost like Bathsheba's in one of those, frankly, ridiculously sexualized fake adverts. Remember them from years ago? Only the crumbliest fake and all that.

Maybe she's eating chocolate in a bubble bath when the phone rings and she's invited over, you know. It's not quite the floozy in the jacuzzi, this story, but it's often seen as an example of mutual, consensual seduction.

[3 : 45] And this view has become pretty widespread. So, anything from song lyrics, such as classic by Leonard Cohen, Hallelujah, a cover of which was Christmas number one, not so long ago, includes these words, referencing David and Bathsheba, saying, you saw her bathing on the roof, her beauty in the moonlight overthrew you.

So, from that, to all sorts of art, from Rembrandt, who painted this one, to Jerome, all usually giving Bathsheba red hair as a traditional symbol of what's reckoned to be a somewhat scarlet reputation.

But, is all this a fair summary of what the story actually says? So, let's take another, perhaps a little bit slower, look at it.

And we'll look firstly at how it begins, because, as we saw, 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. So, we notice, for a start, it's spring, a time when the weather picks up and kings go off to war, we're told.

[5 : 08] But, despite this fact, and despite the fact that David has sent his troops into battle, it says at the end there, David remained in Jerusalem.

So, straight away, something doesn't quite seem right here. David, this brave warrior leader, has chosen, not to go with his men, but to stay tucked up in his palace.

And he was literally tucked up, it seems, having a bit of an early nap because one 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 and David sent someone to find out about her. So, not only is it springtime, it's evening time and David gets up and takes a walk around on his palace roof, a building which would have been the highest residence in Jerusalem and from where, as king, he could look across and down on the rest of the city.

And we're told, from the roof, he saw a woman bathing. Now, where was she bathing? Well, we don't know.

[6 : 26] We don't know. And despite what Leonard Cohen and umpteen painters might have us believe, there's no mention that Bathsheba herself was bathing on the roof.

That's complete speculation. She could have been on the roof, perhaps behind a screen which could still be sort of peered over from a higher vantage point.

But she could just have easily have been in a room, you know, albeit obviously visible through a window. Either way, remember it's evening, but most people would have turned in for the night and there's no indication she's expecting or indeed wanting anyone to be watching her.

What's more, while some Bible translations describe Bathsheba as bathing, the original Hebrew word that's translated as bathing here in this verse is just as often translated as washing and indeed many of the more recent English translations change this word bathing for washing which does kind of change the mood a little bit, changes the tone perhaps of the scene we can imagine being played out.

What next? Well, when David sees her washing he doesn't look away in respect of her privacy, no, rather he keeps looking because he clearly notices that she is beautiful.

[8 : 02] Hmm. But then, then, he sends someone to find out about her. In other words, he's making his move.

So the man he sends evidently arcs around and he returns with this news. She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.

And there, with that news, you'd have thought any ideas that David had about pursuing her should have stopped. You know, he finds out who she is but he finds out she's married, married to a guy called Uriah.

And yet, we know from other passages in the Bible that David already had seven wives and at least ten concubines.

Strange word. Basically, it means a sex slave who lived with you. In other words, as king, David, it seems, gets who he wants and he evidently wants lots of women.

[9 : 07] And so, we're told that then David sent messengers to get her, she came to him and he slept with her. Now, I don't know about you, but sending messengers to get her doesn't sound like Bathsheba's got much choice in this matter.

It'd be difficult to say no. It'd be difficult to resist when visited by and told to go with king's men who themselves were no doubt armed.

And so, she came to him and he slept with her. Now, that's all the detail we're given at this point. That's all we're told, so we do need to be careful here.

But it seems to me that since this whole encounter seems to be driven by David's lust, his power, his desire to possess, his ability to control, Bathsheba's consent in all of this is far from clear.

And that leaves us with the possibility, maybe even the probability, that this is best described as rape. And as if to compound everything, the passage continues by telling us this.

[10 : 32] Now, she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness, and she went back home, the woman conceived, and sent word to David saying, I am pregnant.

So, her monthly uncleanness, it's a pretty unhelpful way to describe the fact that she just finished her period, but the fact that she was purifying herself probably explains Bathsheba's earlier washing.

Far from taking a Cadbury flake seductive bath, she was simply following the religious purity rules, which required women to wash themselves at the end of their monthly cycle.

It's a very personal, purifying act, which David has turned into an object of lust. We're told she went back home, no doubt feeling all over the place in her mind, and yet the fact that the end of her monthly cycle meant that she was probably at her most fertile, it's not particularly surprising perhaps that she conceives.

Now, there's no hint of any care or follow-up from David though. Instead, we're simply told that in time Bathsheba's Bathsheba, or as the verse says here, she's now reduced to the woman, the woman conceived, and then she sent word to David that she was pregnant, and there we have it.

[12 : 10] So, if we pause there for a moment, I wonder how you feel when reading that story afresh.

What kinds of emotions does this story provoke? Maybe you feel anger or disgust, maybe you feel pity, maybe there's sympathy involved, maybe there's empathy.

If so, can we empathize with both Bathsheba and David, or is our emotional attachment more with one than the other?

Why might that be? And what might that reveal to us about ourselves? And perhaps most importantly, how do we imagine this whole story makes God feel?

How do you feel when you hear and read that story afresh? I think we do well to pay attention to the feelings that stories like these evoke because they can help us to hear more clearly what God might be wanting to say to us through these stories.

[13 : 35] So hold whatever emotions, whatever reactions or feelings you might be having at the moment because there's more to this particular story to explore.

You see, in finding out that Bathsheba is pregnant, David panics. He sends for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, who we discover has been fighting the Ammonites and the army that David was supposed to be defeating in battle and leading his troops out to face.

He asks Uriah to come back from battle and on returning from the front line, David tries to encourage Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba so that her pregnancy would be seen as legitimate.

But Uriah says, now how could I do such a thing while my men are still out fighting the battle? He's got more loyalty, more integrity it seems than that.

So David then tries to get Uriah drunk, thinking that that will stick his beer goggles on or whatever. And then again he'll sleep with Bathsheba. But that doesn't work either. Again, Uriah has more integrity than that.

[14 : 44] And so in a final desperate act to avoid being discovered, David sends Uriah back into war, back to the front line of the battle.

But he gives orders for the rest of the army to retreat so that Uriah is left on his own on the front line as a sitting duck. And the inevitable happens and Uriah is killed.

And then the chapter ends like this. For when Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him.

After 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.

It's a terrible, tragic story and we can only imagine Bathsheba's grief at losing her husband in such a way. Indeed, it's clear that God is grieved by this whole sorry episode.

[15 : 50] We're told that the thing David had done displeased the Lord. But that's an understatement. The original Hebrew word translated as displeased can also mean something that is ruined by being broken into pieces.

Again, I think we're meant to feel appalled by this. It's meant to break us, if you like, into pieces. Feelings evoked in a way that stories seem to have a unique power to do.

Indeed, not everything in the Bible is intended to be a positive lesson. Instead, often the power of these stories, and I'd say the way in which God breathes through them, is that we're meant to be grieved.

We're meant to be appalled at the violence within them. And yet there's another layer to all this, because it's actually through story that David is confronted with the impact that his sinful behaviour has had.

You see, aware of all that has been going on, there's a prophet in David's court, a guy called Nathan, who approaches David, and tells him a parable. And here it is from the next chapter, 2 Samuel chapter 12.

[17 : 12] So the Lord sent this guy, Nathan, to David. When he came to him, he said this story. He said, there were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor.

The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb that 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. 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'd 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.

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

[18 : 24] And 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.

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.

Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down your either Hittites with the sword and took his wife to be your own.

You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.

Now what I think is fascinating here is that this guy Nathan he could have just approached David and said to him look what are you playing at?

[19 : 27] You've behaved appallingly here you've sinned against God and against people and although this would have been true and perhaps Nathan was in his right to say that it's likely that David would simply have become defensive maybe try to explain away or even justify his behaviour in other words for Nathan to have simply condemned David's behaviour would have been unlikely to have any effect on him instead Nathan tells David a story story about a rich man who had loads of livestock but who still insists on taking the only lamb that's owned by a poor man why does he do this well again because it's often only through story that our emotions are truly engaged and most importantly I think it's only often through story that we best see why God puts such value on living in just and righteous and loving ways through story

David's encouraged to feel and empathise with the impact that this bad sinful behaviour has had and so when Nathan tells him sort of the bombshell you are the rich man you've taken Bathsheba this little lamb from poor Uriah well then and only then does David realise it all sinks in the depths of his deeds prompting David to confess this to Nathan saying I have sinned against the Lord now if you want to read David's full confession it's all in Psalm 51 heartfelt prayer of repentance where you get lines like this one wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin takes on maybe extra significance given we know that it all started when David spied Bathsheba ceremonially washing herself and David it seems wants to be washed clean to be purified by God himself but beyond simply

David's reaction I think I'd suggest that Nathan's use of story in order to evoke an emotional response as an illustration of the way in which God uses the whole of the Bible to help shape and deepen our relationship and understanding of him see the Bible is full of stories as we know some of which I'd say are literally true some of which are parables and some of which are a mix of both literal truth and we might say more kind of mythical legend but whether these are true stories or not they are all stories of truth just like Nathan's parable to David some stories as we read the Bible and as we kind of respond to them they're full of negative lessons you know how not to live like David and Bathsheba in this instance while some are much more positive in the way they inspire us but all of these stories that we read in the

Bible I think they're all designed they're all breathed through by God to teach us how to live as people in line with God's ways of truth and justice and love and so by allowing ourselves when we read the Bible to enter into and emotionally connect and respond to these stories that's how God's spirit I think works through us that's how God's spirit speaks to us just as Nathan did to David and helps us perhaps to see ourselves in these stories so when a Bible story makes us feel inspired and uplifted maybe emotionally moved I guess the question is how might we channel those emotions in ways that enable us to treat other people with that same level of kindness or generosity that we see displayed in those kind of stories or when a Bible story makes us feel angry or appalled yes it might be because we sense God's anger at the injustice that's present but I suspect we'd also do well to ask

God to examine why we feel so angry at things see if there's anything within us you know our shadow side maybe that we're struggling to contain or face up to I know for me I'm often most upset by behaviour that I subconsciously dislike about myself so by truly entering into a Bible story in which bad behaviour is in evidence I find that's often if I'm honest with God where God can speak to me and shape my life so profoundly the good news in all of this though is that regardless of whether the story is a positive lesson or a negative lesson there is always hope because we are invited to love and follow the God who is the redeemer of all things indeed God is the one who takes all that we are the best bits the worst bits the everyday in between bits and somehow brings good out of it all

[25 : 18] God it's not without irony therefore that Bathsheba and David would have another child end up being called Solomon whose descendant would be Jesus himself so that makes David and Bathsheba the great great great great great great great great grandparents of Jesus the one who is the embodiment of God working for good in all things so in all of our Bible reading as we discover perhaps how to read the Bible in all of our response to what we read I guess my prayer for you and for me is that we would know and be open to the voice of God's spirit guiding and shaping our lives so that we truly become the people God has made us to be Amen