

# Confronting a Rapist

*A sermon on 2 Samuel 11:1-15 by Nathan Nettleton, 29 July 2018*

© [LaughingBird.net](http://LaughingBird.net)

## Message

All of us, men especially, share responsibility for confronting and changing the culture that enables men to feel entitled to rape, and Jesus leads us into the new culture that sets us all free.

## Sermon

Sometimes when something very significant is demanding a lot of attention in the media and in the cafes, it can still be very difficult for a preacher to know just how to address it and how to connect it to the scriptures that are being read in church. And then other times, a set Bible reading asks exactly the same questions in almost exactly the same way, and that can be even harder and there's a temptation not to notice and play it safe with one of the other readings.

Rape and sexual assault are nothing new, but in recent months, our world has been asking a lot more questions about why they are so prevalent and what can be done about it. Arguments have raged under the banners of #MeToo and #NotAllMen. I've made a few passing references in sermons, but I haven't addressed these issues head on. But tonight, our readings throw up the story of David and Bathsheba.

This story uncovers the horrible big black stain on the otherwise celebrated career of David, king of Israel and Judah. In the overall story of David's reign, this episode exposes David's sin in order to position him as a model of true repentance and to demonstrate the depths of God's transforming love and forgiveness. But it is probably important, especially at present, to avoid rushing straight to that good news, because at the end of tonight's extract David still has blood and semen all over his hands and he thinks he's got away with it.

Even when we don't rush on to the forgiveness story, we preachers more often focus on David's murder of Uriah the Hittite, and fair enough. Uriah was a good and honourable man who'd done nothing to deserve his king's displeasure. But there was another victim in tonight's story. David was guilty of abducting and raping Bathsheba even before he went on to murder her husband. One of the most celebrated "heroes" of the Bible is shown to be a sexual predator.

Down through the years, the Church has been conspicuously reluctant to call David's action rape. It is not surprising that we are reluctant to face the dark side of our heroes, but this has often veered into falsely accusing Bathsheba of seduction and adultery, and our tendency to do that says a lot more about us than it does about the biblical description of Bathsheba. In today's world too, women who have been raped are too often disbelieved and end up having to defend themselves against the same grossly unfair allegations. There is a pattern here that we need to face up to.

In many countries even now, rape victims are routinely forced to marry their rapists or else find themselves convicted and punished for adultery. If you are thinking that it might be unfair to accuse David of rape, please note that the most important piece of evidence is that there is not a single verse in the Bible that calls Bathsheba an adulteress or attributes even a shred of guilt to her. In that world, that's astonishing. Even more than now, women were

routinely blamed for the sexual sins of men, especially powerful men, but the Bible holds David alone responsible in this case.

The fact that we are told her name and the name of her father is probably the Bible's way of telling us that she was a reputable woman from a good family. There are no lawyers here trying to make out that she was trashy and asking for it.

Yes, we are told that Bathsheba was taking a bath naked on her rooftop, but the Bible never suggests there was anything inappropriate about that. Indeed, in a world without indoor plumbing, taking your bath on the rooftop was normal because it was the place where you were most hidden from public view. The royal palace was the only multi-story dwelling in the city, so none of your neighbours can see onto your roof except the king and if you can't trust the king, who can you trust? The Bible does not accuse Bathsheba of flaunting herself.

And frankly, even if she had been flaunting herself, I'm getting a bit sick of men making out that we are so weak that somehow we should be absolved of responsibility if women dress or behave in a provocative manner. Don't be pathetic. I'm perfectly well aware of how powerful our urge for sex can be, but our self-control cannot be taken from us, it can only be given up. If you can only be trusted as long as everyone around you is being straight-laced, grow up.

But unfortunately, powerful men frequently can't be trusted, especially around beautiful women, and David spots her and determines to have her, because he can. David is no frustrated member of the involuntarily celibate mob. He already had seven wives, and almost certainly also had unfettered sexual access to the palace service staff. Even after he makes enquiries and discovers that Bathsheba is married to one of his best and most trusted soldiers, David is determined to have her, because he can.

The biblical language is quite clear about this being a rape. There is not even a hint that Bathsheba's consent was sought or given. It says that he sent members of the palace guard to take her, and she was brought to him, and he had sex with her. This man was the king, the most powerful man in the land. His palace guard had no choice but to carry out his orders, and Bathsheba had no choice either. The Hebrew word used to say that he sent them to "take" her is a quite forceful and violent word. It's not "to invite her over". It is more like "to seize her" or "to grab her". David abducted and raped Bathsheba.

The very next line says she "purified herself after her uncleanness," and while most translations think this refers back to her bath on the roof and is saying she had recently had her period, it is at least as possible that it describes her doing what most rape victims do, trying to wash away the pain and violation and memory of the rape.

The trigger for the recent #MeToo movement was also the exposure of an extremely wealthy and powerful man as a sexual predator. Many of the men who have suddenly had the spotlight turned on their behaviour have also been high profile men. One of the most powerful men in the world is on record as boasting that when you're as famous as him, you can grab them by the pussy and they'll let you. It hasn't cost him yet. We urgently need to face up to questions about the culture of entitlement that grows up around privileged men, and the frequency with which that sense of entitlement turns into sexually predatory behaviour.

In a few of the cases, the victims have been other men which reminds us that in the presence of very powerful men, everyone else is vulnerable, but women are the victims far more often. But the power that renders others vulnerable does not only come with wealth and success. The young man who stands charged with raping and murdering Eurydice Dixon was not wealthy or successful. He was just bigger and stronger than her.

A lot of us men are still having trouble understanding why so many women say they feel vulnerable and fearful around men all the time. I've had trouble understanding it too, but I'm learning. I think that most of us men do know what it is like to feel constantly wary and vigilant around mobs of rowdy men. I've been a victim of random violence by strangers twice, and I spent months looking over my shoulder. But it recently occurred to me that I feel that way even though the potentially dangerous men are not usually a lot bigger than me. I am about 50% bigger and heavier than my wife, even though I am not unusually big and she is not unusually small. So how would I feel if those men that make me wary were nearly all that much bigger than me. That would make them all about 6 foot 10, and nearly 140 kilos. Then add to that the fear of not just getting punched and kicked but sexually assaulted or raped, and I'm beginning to sense a little of what that might feel like.

Bathsheba had an elite soldier for a husband; the sort of bloke who'd swim through a flooded cave to rescue a bunch of lost kids if required. But elite soldiers are often not home. And unbeknown to her, her extremely powerful neighbour was a sexual predator with a massive unchecked sense of entitlement. No amount of well intentioned advice about keeping yourself safe was going to help her.

If you're anything like me, many of you who have not heard this said about David before are probably still looking for some wriggle room, some way to downplay this and let him off the hook a bit. We like our heroes to keep their aura. But there are no mitigating factors for David. Like the four gospels, there are two versions of the David stories in the Bible. The other one reads more like palace propaganda than this one. If the story could be cleaned up, they'd have gone to any lengths to do it, but it can't, so in that version they just left it out completely. They silenced Bathsheba. Rape victims still get silenced more often than not.

All too often too, like Bathsheba, women end up depending on their abusers for survival. They can't afford to lose the job, or they can't risk losing custody of their kids, or they can't afford the lawyers or face being re-traumatised on the witness stand, so they keep working for him, or stay married to him. When Bathsheba's rape results in a pregnancy, she has no one to turn to but the king, and when she asks David for help, he murders her honourable and beloved husband. And if that's not bad enough, she ends up having to live with her rapist, share his bed, and bear him more children. And there have been many more like her ever since. Many many more like him too.

There are many many good men too who are horrified by these things. And somewhat understandably, some of them have started their own # campaign, #NotAllMen. Not all men are rapists, they say. Not all men disrespect women. Not all men can be held responsible for the actions of the bad ones. And that's true, but only up to a point.

I'm not to blame for the behaviour of Harvey Weinstein or Don Burke. I'm not to blame, but that's not the same as having no responsibility. Because you see, those sick men are products of a culture and have been protected by a culture, and we all share some responsibility for the

culture. We all share responsibility for the change that has to happen in the culture. If the cultural fabric has holes in it that aid and abet the rapists, then we all share a responsibility for repairing those holes. And every time you or I cringe and turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to casual sexism or to jokes or behaviours that demean and harass women, we are allowing those holes to be torn a little wider. We are complicit in our timid silence. Every time we fail to be part of the solution, we are part of the problem. We need to step up.

Although it is usually men who are best placed to speak truth to the attitudes and behaviour of other men, this is not only about men. The world is not neatly divided into male culture and female culture, one bad and one good, and we all share responsibility for the ways we contribute to or challenge the culture we are part of. There are more than a few mothers out there who treat their growing sons like little gods who can do no wrong and are thus making a major contribution to their growth into dangerously entitled and irresponsible fuckwits who will behave just like David.

Men or women, if we are going to be culture changers, we will need to capture a vision of a new culture, a new world. We will need models to follow who will lead us in a way very different to the way of the King Davids and Harvey Weinsteins of this world. The best model is Jesus who came proclaiming and embodying the new culture of God. It is he who has best captured in his own life and teaching the deep yearnings of our hearts for a world of love and respect and mutuality.

Living, as we do, in a world that has made major improvements in the rights of women, we can easily fail to recognise just how earth-shatteringly radical Jesus's treatment of women was in his day. He models a pattern of unprecedented and astonishing respect for women. We don't have any record of Jesus having sexual relationships, but we can still read the sexual implications of his example and teaching. Sex is so incredibly powerful, for good or for ill, but in every aspect of life, Jesus consistently leads us out of battlegrounds of fear and coercion, and invites us into flourishing gardens of love and gentleness and mutual delight.

It is as simple as his teaching that we should love one another as he has loved us and treat one another as we would wish to be treated, but don't let me hear any of you men sniggering and saying that you'd be more than happy to be treated as sex objects so you can treat your lovers that way. While it is true that we men often do feel that way, turning it backwards would actually be a pathetically shallow spin on the sexual implications of Jesus's words. I like to be treated with gifts of craft beer from time to time, but that doesn't mean I should treat my wife with gifts of craft beer. She doesn't like beer.

At a deeper level, the way I wish to be treated is to be listened to and understood and to have my unique desires and needs taken seriously and honoured and treated with love and respect. So treating others as I would like to be treated means listening to them carefully, and learning how they experience the world, and treating them as they long to be treated with all the love and care and respect and tenderness that I am learning from Jesus. Men, that includes listening deeply to the testimony of women about how our attitudes and behaviours impact on them, without getting defensive or trying to reinterpret their experiences.

When we can begin to take that seriously, and live that out courageously, then we will begin to be the change that the world so desperately needs. We will know the truth, and the truth will set us free. All of us. We will begin to see how this #MeToo moment can be one of those

cultural tipping points where the world as we have known it cracks open and the Holy Spirit beckons us through the gaps into the fresh and fragrant air of a new world beyond, of a new culture beyond, indeed of the realm of God, the world of our deepest longings.