

Altitude Sickness

Mount Everest has been described as the world's largest open graveyard. There are at least 290 bodies of climbers frozen on the mountain. Some of them were killed by avalanches and injuries from falls. But most died in what is known as the death zone. At around 8000 metres or 26,000 feet, which is the cruising height of a jet airliner, the oxygen level is not sufficient to sustain human life. In the death zone, the human body cannot acclimatize, as it uses oxygen faster than it can be replenished. If a person stays in the death zone and their oxygen supply runs out, they become disoriented, they can't make rational decisions, their body begins to shut down, and eventually they become unconscious, and die. It makes no difference how strong they are, how many mountains they have climbed before, how smart they think they are or if they think they are the exception to the rule, altitude sickness kills. Most of those who have died in the death zone were some of the best climbers in the world. The only cure for altitude sickness is to come down from the death zone to where there is air to breathe.

Altitude Sickness Is A Killer

There was a time in the life of King David when altitude sickness nearly killed him. He had got to the top of his Everest by killing Goliath, being strong enough not to kill King Saul, surviving in the wilderness and building a reputation as an amazing leader. When he was anointed as King, he led an army that beat the Philistines, the Amelkites, the Jebusites, Moabites, Syrians, Edomites, Ammonites, and the Hittites. If there had been any more "ites" around he would have cleaned them up too. When David stood at the top of his Everest, he was the king of a vast empire, riding on a wave of achievement. Every nation he conquered provided him with huge quantities of gold, silver and bronze. He had more possessions than he knew what to do with. For example, when he defeated the Syrians, he crippled one thousand seven hundred of their horses because he had no use for them. At 60 thousand square miles, David's kingdom was so big and so strong, even the Egyptians had a healthy respect for him. The greatest days in the history of Israel were when David was king. All Israel were in awe of him. At 50 years of age when he had been king for 20 years, he was at his physical peak. He had money, power, and the adoration of the people. And for him, that was the danger zone. He was suffering from altitude sickness, but his senses were so dulled that he couldn't see it. He wasn't hearing properly and he wasn't seeing properly.

2 Samuel 11 tells the story of how altitude sickness affected his judgement. It's a long story, and it's so well known I'm not going to read it all this morning. At the highest point in his life, in the highest position in the kingdom, at the highest place in the city, David looked down on Bathsheba bathing, and he wanted her. Never mind that Bathsheba was married to someone else. Never mind that he was already married to several women, and had concubines as well. Bathsheba was beautiful, and he wanted her. In order to have her, he had to kill her husband. But altitude sickness had blurred his judgement so much, he had her husband Uriah killed. David's sin with Bathsheba wasn't so much about lust, as about power.

Altitude Sickness Causes us To Ignore God.

When David spied beautiful Bathsheba he could have said to himself, "God has already given me everything I need. This is not right. I need to turn away from this desire. I need to get on my horse and get out there with the army. If I hang around here I'm going to get into trouble." But altitude sickness causes us to ignore the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Up until this point, the biggest thing in David's life was God. God was on every page of his story. David prayed. David trusted God when he faced his giants. David told Saul that God prevented him from killing him. But in the account of David and Bathsheba there is no mention of God. There is a warning from God, but David doesn't listen. It's tucked away in verse 3 of 2 Samuel 11. ***"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."*** (2 Samuel 11:3 NIV) The man reports back to David with a warning "This woman is off limits. She not just a nobody. She is Eliam's daughter. She is Uriah's wife." David knows who Eliam is. He knows who Uriah is. God is warning him to back off. But David is the King. He can write his own rules. David gets what David wants. It's all about David. See what altitude sickness does? It messes with your head. The only mention of God in this whole story is in the last part of the last verse of the chapter. It's so small, you could easily miss it. The story seems to end like a happily ever after story. Uriah died. David and Bathsheba got married and had a baby. Awww, isn't that nice? But don't miss the last bit. ***"But the thing David had done displeased the Lord."*** (2 Samuel 11:27 NIV) There is so much packed into that little phrase. When God is displeased, there are big consequences. In case you don't get how big the consequences were for David, let me spell them out for you.

Altitude Sickness - The Consequences.

God sent Nathan the prophet to confront David about his sin. Someone had to climb the mountain, and rescue the man with altitude sickness. He heeded to be brought down the mountain quickly to save his life. That was a scary thing for Nathan to have to do. It was possible that Nathan would lose his life to save David's life. When God sends you to rescue someone with altitude sickness it's going to be risky for you. Through Nathan the prophet God spelled out what was going to happen to David.

***"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 Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.' "This is what the Lord says: 'Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight. You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.'"* (2 Samuel 12:7-12 NIV)**

From that day onwards, turmoil and tragedy struck David's family. The baby born to David and Bathsheba died. The surrounding nations no longer believed Israel's God was holy. David's son Amnon raped his half sister Tamar, and afterwards discarded her like a rag doll. Tamar was so messed up by what had been done to her she was never the same again. Her brother Absalom took revenge on her behalf and killed Amnon, before going on the run. For two years, David and Absalom avoided each other, even though they lived in the same city. Later on Absalom staged a coup that resulted in David losing the throne and running from Jerusalem. Then Absalom was chased down by some of David's loyal soldiers and was killed. Another of David's sons, Adonijah, proclaimed himself king as his father was dying. The consequences of David's altitude sickness carried on for years through his family.

Altitude Sickness – The Recovery.

When Nathan the prophet confronted David, the enormity of what he had done began to sink in. ***"Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." Nathan replied, "The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have shown utter contempt for the Lord, the son born to you will die."* (2 Samuel 12:13-14 NIV)**. By the time Nathan the prophet came to confront David, it was too late. The sin with Bathsheba was going to bring its consequences, no matter how broken hearted and repentant David was. He pleaded with God that Bathsheba's baby wouldn't die. He refused to eat and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground. But the child still died. Sin always has its consequences. David's sin with Bathsheba marks a turning point in his life. Up until then he was confident and cocky. He thought he was bulletproof. But when his cheating, murderous heart was exposed, we see a different side of David. We see a broken heart.

After Nathan the prophet exposed his sin, one of the Psalms David wrote was Psalm 51. This is the sort of prayer that comes from a broken heart.

***"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."* (Psalm 51:1-17)**

Our Altitude Sickness?

None of us here are likely to be a King. We don't have a retinue of servants to order around. The only orders I give are for fish and chips. We don't have the sort of clout David had. But in our honest moments, there are times when we suffer from altitude sickness. Times when we lose our sight and our hearing. When we think it's our right to have something because of our position. When we expect our employees to obey us because we are the supervisor or the boss. When we misuse our authority as parents. When we look down on other people because we think their job isn't as important as ours. And how many times have we ignored the word from the Lord sent to through someone else? How many times has our vision been so blurred because we don't see people as they really are? David didn't see Bathsheba. He saw Bathsheba's curves. He saw her as a conquest. Did he see her as the wife of Uriah? No. Did he see her as a creation of God? No. We need to recover from our altitude sickness before it kills us.

God's Big Story

Have you ever asked yourself why this story is in the Bible? It's not that God wanted to spice up the story of David's life with a bit of juicy gossip. It's here because God wants us to know, that no matter who we are, or how far up the mountain we have climbed, when we sin and lose our way, he will send someone to help us recover from altitude sickness. It's a story of hope. This story says that if God could rescue David from his altitude sickness, he can rescue me from mine. It's a foretaste of all the forgiveness and restoration we find through Jesus. It reminds us that even the best people are broken people, but that broken people can be forgiven and healed. The Apostle John writes this in the New Testament. ***"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*** (1 John 1:9 NIV)

We are going to take a moment to pray. If the story of David and Bathsheba has been a mirror for you, and through it the Lord has shown you altitude sickness in your own life, then do what David did. Take a moment to confess that to the Lord, ask his forgiveness and ask him to teach you how to live in humility before him.

Prayer.