

“The Rape of Tamar: Dealing with Sexual Abuse”

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I greatly appreciate the opportunity to share with you this morning. This is not an easy topic so let me start my sermon on sexual abuse by giving you something to feel very good about. The very fact that this church is willing to have a sermon on sexual abuse and the very fact that you are willing to come hear this topic being addressed reflects health and it shows great respect for victims of sexual abuse. It shows that your church wants to be part of the solution and not perpetuate the problem. And that is a huge blessing. In the past two years we have watched the MeToo movement shake our society in enormous ways. A huge number of highly influential, and in many cases highly respected individuals from all walks of life has had highly credible sexual abuse allegations lodged against them. Some of these men have gone to jail. Many have lost their jobs. The list spans both political parties, business and media leaders, as well as mega church pastors. Sadly, it has taken secular journalists to finally force many churches and denominations to deal with a tragic history of ignoring or covering up sexual abuse. For instance, this past year the *Houston Chronicle* did a hard-hitting series on sexual abuse in the largest Christian denomination—Southern Baptist Association. It was titled: “Abuse of Faith 20 years, 70 victims, Southern Baptist sexual abuse spreads as leaders resist reforms.” The journalists chronicled hundreds of instances of pastors and lay church leaders who sexually abused children and women who continued on in ministry. I could give many other examples from other churches, denominations, and families but you get the point—all too often Christians fail to understand or respond properly to sexual abuse. *And that failure is always very costly.* (I should note that recently Southern Baptist have taken some very good steps towards change—but as they themselves acknowledge, it has been extremely costly to survivors and everyone else). And your pastors are clearly committed to this process.

Thankfully, God has not left us without guidance. In fact, he gave an entire chapter of Scripture which gives a very clear and thorough overview of the nature and effects of sexual abuse. So lets turn to 2 Samuel 13. Scripture does not shy away from the ugly issues of sexual sin. God knows that these issues must be addressed, so he providentially included them in sacred Scripture. 2 Sam 13:1-21 describes the rape of Tamar by her half brother Amnon. This account is

very ugly and unsettling, but very helpful. It gives us insights that will allow us to respond to sexual abuse in a healthy, healing manner.

Before I read this account in 2 Sam 13, I'd like to put the problem of sexual abuse into proportion by giving you a few of the latest statistics on abuse in America. This is based on a tremendous amount of research, so I am very confident of the accuracy of the following tragic statistics:

Experts estimate that in America, roughly 1 out of 4 girls and one out of 7 boys experience contact sexual abuse before they turn 18. Sexual abuse is not just a problem for children. In fact, rates of date rape among adolescents have skyrocketed. A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association revealed that 20% of high school girls are physically or sexually abused by other adolescent males--boyfriends, dates, or acquaintances. In other words, 1 out of 5 girls will be abused by a peer while they are in high school.

Let's now look at 2 Sam 13 and draw several lessons about sexual abuse and abusive families as we move through the passage.

1. SEXUAL ABUSE HAPPENS IN ALL KINDS OF FAMILIES

2 Samuel 13:1-2 "Now Absalom, David's son, had a beautiful sister, whose name was Tamar. And after a time Amnon, David's son, loved her."

One of the greatest myths we must overcome regarding sexual abuse is that it only happens in other families, other churches, or in other races. The fact is that we are all sinners and have the capacity to allow our sexuality to become abusive. A few years ago I visited the Family Advocacy Center in Phoenix, which is a wonderful facility which provides comprehensive services to victims of physical and sexual abuse and their families. The director told me that they have discovered in interviewing their clients that 80% of them (mainly women) attend church. And they represent all races and backgrounds. While research shows that physical abuse rates are higher in poorer families, sexual abuse is spread evenly through all religious, ethnic, and social segments of society. So sexual abuse doesn't just happen in non Christian families. It happens in all kinds of families. If we had been Jews living in 10th century BC, we might have been tempted to believe that abuse only happened in the Philistine or the Ammonite families. Or it only happened in the poorest Jewish families. But who would have thought it could happen in the royal family? Furthermore, who would have thought that the sexual abuser would be Amnon, the

royal prince who would succeed David on the throne? Who would think that the beautiful royal princess Tamar would be an abuse victim? She was because sexual abuse happens in all kinds of families.

2. IN ABUSIVE FAMILIES, THE VICTIM IS MADE RESPONSIBLE

2 Samuel 13:2-6 And Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. ³ But Amnon had a friend, whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David's brother. And Jonadab was a very crafty man. ⁴ And he said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." ⁵ Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed and pretend to be ill. And when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me bread to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" ⁶ So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. And when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand."

As this story unfolds, it reads like a modern tragedy in which the victim is completely unaware of the looming danger. Everything in this passage tells us that Tamar was a godly, gracious woman whose only misfortune was having a brother who took advantage of her beauty and her innocence. Verse two reveals Amnon's true character. He was so frustrated because of his "love" for his beautiful sister Tamar that he made himself sick. Amnon was specifically said to be frustrated because Tamar was a virgin and it was "hard to do anything to her." This probably refers to the fact that royal virgins were kept under close guard, so Amnon was not able to have sexual relations with her. Amnon's "love" was nothing more than incestuous lust that he had fanned into a raging fire. The irony here is that Amnon made himself sick with his own lust for his sister. But unfortunately, Amnon's cousin Jonadab was wicked and crafty, so instead of confronting Amnon for his lust, he concocts a plan to help him satisfy it by abusing Tamar. Amnon, Jonadab, and David (with varying degrees of knowledge) all placed the responsibility on Tamar to heal Amnon's self-induced sickness. In abusive families the victim is made responsible for solving needs, even evil needs, that they did not create and could never legitimately satisfy. While it is somewhat unusual for sexual abusers to have an accomplice to tell them how to

successfully satisfy their lust by raping a family member. The modern pornography industry comes very close to doing this.

3. IN SEXUALLY ABUSIVE FAMILIES, THE TRUTH IS IGNORED

2 Samuel 13:7 Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house and prepare food for him."

Amnon followed his cousin's advice perfectly. He feigned illness to get David to send Tamar to feed him bread cakes. David fully cooperated with Amnon's fiendish plan, and ordered Tamar to go to Amnon's house and prepare him food. If this was all the information we had regarding David's response to Tamar, we might conclude that he had been so thoroughly deceived that he bore little responsibility for the violation of Tamar. David's repeated behavior toward his children shows otherwise. In fact, David demonstrates another trait of abusive families—vulnerable family members are not protected because no one really wants to know the truth. It is ignored. In other words, maintaining one's own emotional well-being is more important than admitting that dangerous family problems exist. As the God-ordained spiritual leader charged with the well-being of his household (Deut 6:1-9; Prov 1:8-9; 4:1), David should have at least known that something was wrong with Amnon, whose depression was quite evident to other family members. The fact that Amnon was next in line to the throne makes it even more inexcusable that David failed to observe such wholesale moral turmoil in his own son. Amnon's moral character most likely eroded over an extended period of time. No spiritually healthy man wakes up one morning and decides that he will rape his sister. David apparently chose to see nothing and do nothing, and Tamar was raped as a result.

David's subsequent actions after Tamar's rape confirm the assessment that David did not protect her because he did not want to know the truth. After the rape, when Amnon's predatory deviancy was public knowledge, David did absolutely nothing. *His silence shouts in the biblical account. There is no indication that David consoled Tamar, cautioned Absalom, or punished Amnon. He is lamely silent. He does not ask because he apparently does not want to know.* Later on, when unavenged Absalom asks for Amnon to go with him to the sheep shearing, David allowed him to go, precipitating his murder (2 Sam 13:24-29). Later on when Absalom began to steal away the heart of the people, which ultimately resulted in civil war, David was oblivious to his son's growing rebellion (2 Sam 15:1-14). David's failure to embrace the truth of Absalom's

bitterness cost the lives of at least 20,000 soldiers (2 Sam 18:7) and the life of Absalom (2 Sam 18:14-15). It also directly led to 10 royal concubines being publicly raped (2 Sam 15:16; 16:22). David did not protect because he did not want to be disturbed with the truth.

Celestia and I have heard hundreds of stories in which palpable evidence of abuse was chronically ignored, with no questions asked. This evidence includes a wife's unmistakable facial bruises, children who cower and scream the moment a parent or older sibling comes into the room, the inexplicable discovery of a young child's bloody underwear, a 10 year-old boy who suddenly begins wetting the bed and having nightmares shortly after visiting his aunt and uncle, , and a husband who repeatedly gets up in the middle of the night to go to a child's room, shuts the door, and each time afterward washes the child's sheets leaving them folded on the dryer the next morning. In each of these instances family members asked no questions, and abuse continued. In abusive families truth is not a friend but the enemy.

4. SEXUAL ABUSERS USE FORCE AND MANIPULATION AGAINST THEIR VICTIMS

2 Samuel 13:8-14 So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. And she took dough and kneaded it and made cakes in his sight and baked the cakes. 9 And she took the pan and emptied it out before him, but he refused to eat. And Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. 10 Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, that I may eat from your hand." And Tamar took the cakes she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. 11 But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister." 12 She answered him, "No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this outrageous thing. 13 As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the outrageous fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you." 14 But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her.

Amnon's ruse worked, and after sending out the servants, he gained private access to Tamar. At this point he wasted no more time pretending to be a bed-ridden invalid. He grabbed Tamar and lewdly demanded sex. The language of the text highlights Amnon's abusive use of physical force to hold Tamar against her will. The verb used here for "grab" is the same one used

in 2 Sam 2:16 of Jewish soldiers “seizing” enemy soldiers by the head so that they could stab them to death. This highlights the fact that rape victims and other types of abuse victims should not be blamed for what happened to them. Sexual abusers use force to get their sordid way--be it physical force, emotional blackmail, verbal threats, intimidation, or calculated emotional manipulation to hold victims against their will so they can abuse them. It is important to recognize that abusers use a wide range of behaviors other than mere physical force to seize and hold their victims. Additionally, those who are chronically abused develop a sense of powerlessness so that their abuser need not physically force them in order to continue to abuse them. This explains many situations in which the abuse victim inexplicably fails to simply walk away from the abuser. For instance, several years ago twelve year old Elizabeth Smart was reportedly abducted at knife-point from her Salt Lake City home by a homeless religious drifter, was held against her will, and was sexually abused; yet months after her abduction when she was discovered by local police, she did not attempt to flee but rather lied about her identity to remain with her abuser who had forced her to become his next wife.

Amnon’s twisted emotional manipulation is seen in his crass and confusing sexual demand; for this is the first and only time he calls Tamar “his sister.” As we have seen in the previous chapter, abusers manipulate with their words and actions, and have little regard for the impact of their manipulation on the victim. For Tamar, “sister” should have been a term that denoted a tender familial relationship that elicited steadfast loyalty, care, and protection (Gen 34:1-31; Lev 18:11; cp. 1 Tim 5:2). Instead, this sister received violent defilement, contempt, and abandonment.

5. SEXUAL ABUSE VICTIMS ARE SHAMED, BLAMED, AND DEMEANED

2 Samuel 13:15-17 Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, "Get up! Go!" ¹⁶ But she said to him, "No, my brother, for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me." But he would not listen to her. ¹⁷ He called the young man who served him and said, "Put this woman out of my presence and bolt the door after her."

Unfortunately, Amnon’s abusive behavior did not stop with the rape. After his lust was satiated, hatred welled up in his heart and he ordered Tamar to “get up, go away.” Tamar refused to leave, and argued that sending her away was more evil than the rape itself. Amnon’s response

was to order the servants to throw “this woman” out and bolt the door. While it seems very strange to modern readers that a woman would want to stay with her rapist, we must put Tamar’s actions in their historical context. In this ancient patriarchal culture that placed great emphasis on sexual purity and honor, a young woman who had lost her virginity, even through rape, would have few chances of marriage. Without marriage, a woman would have little chance of supporting herself and thus had no social or financial future. She would also be unable to have children, which was the single most important role of women in Jewish culture. For this reason, Old Testament law mandated that when a man raped an unmarried woman, he had to pay a dowry and marry her. He could not divorce her. Thus, Tamar cried out that Amnon’s second act was worse than the first, for in kicking her out and not marrying her, he was killing her future.

Amnon thus showed great disdain for Tamar by in essence saying that she was not worthy to be married to anyone, not even to her rapist. The manner in which Absalom threw Tamar out was also demeaning and abusive—he ordered a slave to remove Tamar, a princess. Furthermore, she is no longer viewed as his sister but as “this woman.”

Not only do sexual abusers shame, blame, and demean their victims, but often families and communities do the same. *In a twisted way, it often seems easier to blame the victim than the perpetrator.* Several years ago Celestia began working with a very troubled teenage client. After a few sessions she shared that she had gone to a shopping mall and met some local teenage boys who offered her a ride home. She was flattered and accepted their offer. Instead of taking her home, however, they took her out into the desert and gang raped her. Eventually they let her go and threatened her not to tell anyone what had happened. She had the courage to tell the authorities and to press charges against the boys. When the principal of the conservative Christian high school she attended heard about the incident, he expelled her from the school. He stated that only a slut would allow such a thing to happen to her, and they did not want sluts in their Christian school. Abusive families shame and blame the victim.

CONCLUSION

So what can we learn from this horrible story of the rape of Tamar? We can boil it down to three potent principles:

1. To all of us--we can offer love and care to those wounded by sexual abuse.

Actually this chapter does not end quite as bleak as it might appear. Notice that while the rest of her dysfunctional family had horribly wounded Tamar, Absalom took her in. He was no abuse expert to be sure. But he gave her the home she wouldn't otherwise have. He loved her, cared for her, and later even named his daughter after her. In the near future God may bring an abuse survivor from this congregation, from your neighborhood, or from your extended family into your life. You and this congregation can be the healthy, loving family they have never had. You don't have to be an abuse expert. I'm so thankful that Tamar had an Absalom in her life. You can do that to the Tamar's in your life. You can do that by being willing to listen to painful stories when someone gets the courage to share with you. Your tears for their pain, patience, and prayers will go far in their healing.

2. To abuse survivors--LOOK TO JESUS

Hebrews 4:15-16 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that we can and should turn to Jesus for help and grace because He is a sympathetic high priest who has experienced the same kinds of painful human experiences we do (except that He didn't sin). This includes abuse. Jesus died by physical abuse. He experienced horrible verbal abuse. And He understands sexual abuse—remember He was crucified naked in front of the mocking crowds. If you have been abused, Jesus understands and cares for you. Look to Him for strength and comfort.

3. To abuse survivors--Let others help you

Galatians 6:2--“Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

Shame often keeps survivors from letting others assist them but this is essential. We are most deeply wounded by others; God has created us so that we are most healed by others.

MTS resources; small groups; counselors, etc.