

THE LOSS OF MORAL AUTHORITY

SERIES: "YOU ARE THE MAN"

by Steve Zeisler

Typewriters have become obsolete, like slide rules and rotary telephones. I think that's a good thing. Typing was one of my worst classes in high school. Fine motor skills are not my strength. And unfortunately for me there was no way to fake competence in typing class. We had to turn in perfect papers. Had we been allowed to make errors, I could type 60-70 words per minute, but I could only achieve half that with accuracy.

Now, as you know, the modern counterpart of the old typewriter is the word processor. With a word processor, you need not print a hard copy until you're ready to. The document exists only in computer memory, and there is a delete key, an undo command, a spelling checker, and all kinds of things to fix your mistakes before you ever print it out. It seems to me that's a much better way to do things.

Similarly, old games used to consist of real manipulatives: chess pieces, Scrabble letter tiles, and so on. You knew whether you had done well or not because the evidence was in front of you. Modern games, of course, are electronic, and if anything bad happens, you just hit the "start over" button, and all the deaths you've died are wiped out.

It turns out, though, that real life is much more like the old typewriter than the modern word processor. Real life has consequences that cannot be altered with a delete key.

We've come now in our series of studies to the long-term outcomes of David's rebellion. David imagined himself to be a sort of god, ordering life and death of his subordinates-until the awful day when Nathan came and faced him with his sin. David's heart finally broke before the Lord, and the interior suffering to which he had been subjected was finally relieved as he admitted publicly, "I have sinned against the LORD."

Now what follows is the account of David's loss of control. Where once he seemed to be in command of everything, at the center of his own universe, now he can't stop things from unraveling.

In the last message ([Discovery Paper #4593](#)), we heard Nathan's prediction to David: "Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house...." And he further predicted the rending of David's own family. It would become a circle of violence, pride, defiant betrayal, and finally public humiliation.

Now, there is a redemptive aspect to all this. It is good that David loses his authority over everything. He becomes a man who is yielded to God rather than one who challenges God, and the good work that happens inside David is his restoration to a loving relationship with God.

CONSEQUENCES: A THEME OF DEATH

But in this message we're going to talk about hard consequences. David has three sons who will die untimely deaths. (The sword in David's house will actually take the lives of four of David's sons, because Adonijah, who will later rebel against the house of David, will be executed for his rebellion, and that is probably tied to all these things as well.)

The story of the first of the three sons whose life is forfeit is in 2 Samuel 12:15-25:

After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill. David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them.

On the seventh day the child died. David's servants were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they thought, "While the child was still living, we spoke to David but he would not listen to us. How can we tell him the child is dead? He may do something desperate."

David noticed that his servants were whispering among themselves and he realized the child was dead. "Is the child dead?" he asked.

"Yes," they replied, "he is dead."

Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the LORD and worshipped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate.

His servants asked him, "Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!"

He answered, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and he went to her and lay with her. She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon. The LORD loved him; and because the LORD loved him, he sent word through Nathan the prophet to name him Jedidiah.

Because of David's sin, his innocent son will die. As I mentioned in the last message, I am convinced that the death of this first son as a repercussion of David's rebellion is a foreshadowing of the later and greater son of David, the Messiah, our Lord Jesus himself. David's innocent son at this time died for David's sins, and later, in a more profound and humanity-saving way, David's innocent son Jesus also died for David's sins, and the sins of every one of us. This is a reminder that our sins deserve death. It is right that death should be the result of rebellious, hard-hearted, sinful choices.

But it is also a reminder that death is not the end of the story. Even now, having lost his son, David says, "I am going to be with my son again. Although he cannot come back to me, I will go to him." This is a powerful statement of David's faith that the relationship broken as this little baby died is not ended. He has hope in something future. The story of the birth of Solomon that follows is another hint of resurrection. There is life after death. The grave is not the final word. This son born to David and Bathsheba under righteous circumstances, not sinful ones, is also named Jedidiah, "Loved by the Lord."

There are two other grown sons who also lose their lives as a result of David's rebellion, Amnon and Absalom. They were probably in their teens or twenties when David committed adultery with Bathsheba, covered it up, and was finally exposed. Whatever they knew during the time of the cover-up, once their father's sins were out in the open, they learned all the details. They saw who he was, they reflected on his actions, and they became like him. They made terrible choices directly in the pattern of the king's.

CONSEQUENCES: PARALYSIS

Second Samuel 13 recounts one of the most heartbreaking stories in the Bible. It recounts how Amnon uses the language of love to describe lust for his half-sister Tamar. Tamar and Absalom have different mothers, but they are both David's children. Amnon obsesses about this girl, and he is in such anguish to sexually have her that he cannot think of anything else. So he arranges a subterfuge to get her into his bedroom, and then rapes her. Verse 15:

Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her.

His lust masqueraded as love, and now his guilt masquerades as rejection and hatred of her. He hates himself, but he throws her from him in disgust. And so Tamar's life is ruined in the process as well.

What do we hear of David as this tale is told? First Amnon's friend Jonadab comments. It's striking to me how often in the Bible there is a sin enabler nearby. Whenever you're tempted to rebellion, there's often somebody who will help you act accordingly. Jonadab was such a "friend."

He speaks in verse 5:

"Go to bed and pretend to be ill," Jonadab said. "When your father comes to see you, say to him, 'I would like my sister Tamar to come and give me something to eat. Let her prepare the food in my sight so I may watch her and then eat it from her hand.'"

Jonadab's notion here is that David is too broken and weak and lost in his own confusion about himself to realize what he's doing. They can use David to bring about this rape scene and make him an accessory to the terrible thing that happens.

David is by now such a shell of his former self that although he has lived long enough to know better, he doesn't act. His instincts fail him, his judgment is poor. So he sends Tamar to Amnon.

In verse 13, Tamar further comments about David as she realizes what is about to happen:

"What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace? And what about you? You would be like one of the wicked fools in Israel. Please speak to the king; he will not keep me from being married to you."

What Tamar is advocating here is that an incestuous marriage be arranged, which was against the law. But her notion of her father is that he is the one who covers up problems, who finds the easy way out. There need be no confrontation or judgment.

Verse 21 gives this summary of events:

When King David heard all this, he was furious.

Period. He doesn't do anything. Verse 23 picks up the story two years later. All this time David has known that his son raped his daughter, that the lust that drove his life once is now driving the life of his son. As the story unfolds, Absalom, the full brother of Tamar, waits for his father to act and cares for his disgraced sister. For two years nothing happens. Absalom finally decides, "I am going to avenge my sister." He is a proud and violent man, and he doesn't wait for the grass to grow under his feet. David has lost his way. He doesn't know how to be a father. He doesn't know how to be a king. He doesn't know how to exercise the strong discipline that is needed. He sees himself when he sees Amnon, and it brings back all the awful memories. He knows he has contributed to these things. He can't trust his own judgment. He wants to speak, but he doesn't know how. His inadequacy seems overwhelming.

Verse 37 tells of David again after Absalom has arranged the murder of Amnon. Absalom has fled to Talmai, the son of Ammihud, the king of Geshur, the region his mother was from. King David weeps for Amnon every day. Now two sons are dead.

Absalom is in exile for some time, and David is passive. He doesn't know what to do or how to do it. He doesn't know how to fight his son or how to forgive his son. He doesn't know what to say. Others have to arrange for Absalom to return to Jerusalem and for their reconciliation. David is buffaloeed by life. All during this time he is characterized by tentative decision-making, brokenness, and distraction. He has become someone who can't function, because he sees in his sons what he remembers of himself, and he knows that they have learned it from him. Amnon learned lust from him, and Absalom learned violence.

Absalom has greater and greater contempt for his father, whom he regards as a weakling, a worthless shell of a man. Absalom gathers to himself men from all over Israel, names himself king in Hebron, and leads a rebellion against David. He drives David from Jerusalem and sets himself up in the palace. David is off in the wilderness, and, as Nathan predicted, Absalom takes David's women to the roof of his palace and has sex with them there in broad daylight before all of Israel to further declare, as profoundly as he can, how much he scorns his father.

Eventually Absalom's rebellion fails because of his lack of wisdom and experience and because of his pride. His army is defeated by those loyal to David, and Absalom is killed. At the end of the account of the rebellion and of Absalom's death, we read these words in 18:33:

The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you-O Absalom, my son, my son!"

For the third time we have a record of David's tears at the death of one of his children. Nathan told him, "The sword will never depart from your house." There were going to be consequences to his choices. There is no delete key, no spelling checker for the lives we lead. David set in play forces that would lead to terrible consequences in the lives of other people. They are out of his control. He finds himself unable to react as he should, and not only do his sons emulate him, but they suffer from his weakness to respond. Now three of them are dead, and David has wept at the death of each one.

WHAT OTHERS LEARN FROM WHO WE ARE

As with all Scripture, we need to think about the implications of the history that is recorded for us here and learn from it. What lessons can we distill from this?

First, we should note that the grown sons Amnon and Absalom were responsible for their own choices. David unquestioningly had a powerful negative influence upon them. But they were their own men. No one has the right to say to God or to anyone else, "I am evil because my parents made me so."

But it's also fair to say that the consequences of sin are genuine. The influence we have when we are in rebellion is very profound. Parents (and leaders in general) will in fact have strong influence on their children. One of the most foolish statements in the world is the one that parents sometimes make to their children: "You should do as I say, not as I do." People who look up to you will learn from who you are. Jesus said that when a disciple is mature, he will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40). And that works for good and for ill.

Finally, it's important to note that no specific set of consequences is inevitable. There is another way to be strong as a king or a parent. The other way is, in the words of the New Testament, to "...be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" (Ephesians 6:10). Suppose as a parent you're not always wise, thoughtful, kind, gentle, and true. Suppose you have feet of clay, a bad temper, a shaky history. The other way to stand before people who respect you and lead them is to "clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ...." (Romans 13:14). "When I am weak, then I am strong," Paul said (2 Corinthians 12:10). We can advocate what's right not because we always did it right ourselves, but because we've learned from our mistakes and we're forgiven and we can offer the Lord, not ourselves, as the example.

Andy Burnham and I were talking about this some weeks ago. He said, "When I was young, I took drugs. That is part of my history and my kids know it. They use my experience as a challenge to parental authority." Andy's response to his son's challenge at one point was wonderful. He said, "If I were still doing drugs and giving you a 'just say no' lecture, I'd be a hypocrite. But as it is I'm not a hypocrite, I am an expert. I'm forgiven of who I was, and I want to lead you not with my own example, but with the example of Jesus."

WRESTLING WITH A GOOD GOD

Where is God in this story of death, tears, inadequate parenting, rebellion, and sorrow upon sorrow? One place we can observe him is in the paragraph in chapter 12 that tells the story of David when his baby son is dying. There are some wonderful truths there that we ought to learn from.

First, for the seven days the baby is ill, David pays absolute attention to God. It says he lies on the ground at night before the Lord. He fasts for those seven days. He wrestles with God, because he knows that even though a prophet has said, "Your son will die," that may not be the end of the matter. What God says to us is not like a computer calculation or mathematical formulas. David knows that he can speak to God, that God is a father of children. So David spends those days pleading to God the Father as a father for the life of his son.

Remember how Abraham pleaded with God for Sodom, God listened, and they wrestled over the future of Sodom (Genesis 18:16-33). Abraham knew that there was a person at the center of the universe, not a formula. Maybe he would change his mind, maybe there was a greater truth that could be discovered, another way that his justice and his mercy could meet. In the same way, David drew nearer to the Lord rather than quitting, hiding, or blaming God.

Second, in this story we can learn from David's willingness to accept the outcome. When the baby dies, the servants are nervous, thinking, "When the baby was sick, David was overwrought. Now that the baby is dead, he's really going to go off the deep end." But instead he rises, changes his clothes, goes to the temple to worship the Lord, and asks for a meal. When the servants question his behavior, he replies in effect, "It's from the hand of the LORD. I asked for the child's life, but I will take from God what he will give me because it's good. I will say, 'Blessed be the name of the LORD.'"

Third, David knows that death is not the end of the story. "I have lost him now, but I have not lost him forever. I will be with him someday. God is going to bring good out of this somehow." As I've mentioned already, Solomon's birth is further confirmation of God's goodness.

This is how you should relate to your Father. Go to him when you're upset, frightened, concerned, when you don't like things. Talk to him about it. "Present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6). Don't accept the easy answers. Don't quit too soon. Assume that he's there to listen, and then receive what he gives you and be assured that there will be a good outcome to it eventually. He means only good to us.

GOD'S ATTENTION TO OUR TEARS

A final observation about the place of God in all this regards the tears of David. At the death of each of these children we have specific reference to David's sorrow and anguish.

Recall the end of the Bible, John the Revelator's description of the new heaven and the new earth, of Jerusalem descended from above, of life forever. There's a very important reference to tears in Revelation 21:3-5a: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'"

God pays personal attention to our tears. We cry at the chaos of our lives, and at the sorrows that surround us that we've contributed to, that we don't know how to fix. Tears have poured down our cheeks because our hearts are breaking. David's tears are recorded because God is going to wipe away every tear. There is mercy for us even in all of the hard consequences that we set in motion by our bad choices. They are not the final thing. The final thing is God's reaching to us gently and lovingly, wiping the tears from our eyes, putting his arms around us and saying, "There will never again be death or mourning or crying or pain, for they have passed away. Behold, I am making everything new."

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November 15, 1998

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