

Collateral Damage

2 Samuel 13-20

In an Oregon middle school, a prank was getting out of control. Girls were putting on lipstick and then, pressing their lips to the mirrors, leaving dozens of prints. The resourceful principal called the girls to the bathroom and met them there with the custodian. She explained that lip prints make a greasy mess for the poor custodian, who had to clean the mirrors every day. She asked the custodian to demonstrate what he had to go through. He took out a brush, dipped it into the toilet, and scrubbed the mirror. That demonstration eliminated the problem.

God's grace covers the things we do, but in our struggle against sin, it is also valuable to learn to see that sin has an unhealthy, filthy nature to it. There is a reason that it has no place in our lives.

In Paul's day, certain teachers argued that personal sinfulness no longer matters. They said, "No matter how big sin is, God's grace is always bigger." Paul agreed with that statement as far as it went, but these teachers were suggesting that because of grace, we are now free to sin as we please. In fact, some reasoned that we should sin more so as to showcase God's grace. They were taking sin lightly, ignoring the fact that sin is a sinister, malignant thing to be escaped, not embraced. Paul wrote:

¹What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ²By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? - Romans 6:1, 2

Sin is always dangerous and defiling, and while grace can restore our relationship with God and can even empower us to resist further sin, it never makes us safe to sin. God's grace does not always undo the collateral damage our sins create. If we scar ourselves or others with our sins, God can forgive us. Those we scar can even forgive us. But, the scars themselves don't vanish.

David fell as miserably as any man ever has. He slept with a man's wife and then he orchestrated that man's death. God forgave David's sin with Bathsheba. It is one of the most powerful stories of grace in the Bible. Still, even sin that has been forgiven can leave an awful legacy.

After David's great sin, the luster was off the crown. The esteem in which his subjects held him had been dealt a harsh blow. He was no longer as confident in his judgments. He was scrutinized closely and he felt the weight of that scrutiny. His whole kingdom bore the scars of his sin.

Eight dark chapters of 2 Samuel demonstrate that things were never quite the same for David's reign. If I were to give the same treatment to this material as I have given to the rest of David's life, I suspect it would just wear us all down. I think the point can be made in a single message. So, buckle your seat belts as we move as quickly as we can through these eight rocky chapters.

David had been in power for about twenty years. His oldest son, named Amnon fell head over heels in love with Tamar, David's daughter by another of his many wives. Tamar was beautiful, but she was off limits to Amnon unless the king gave her to him in marriage. Amnon was so worked up that his best friend helped him cook up a plot. He pretended to be deathly ill. He asked David to send Tamar to him, essentially to hand-feed him. Then, he tried to seduce her, but Tamar would not be seduced, so Amnon raped her. Then, he sent her away. His so-called love had been merely an animal passion. Once she was no longer the little porcelain doll of his fantasies, he hated her.

David was furious, but not enough to do anything to favorite son. Enter Absalom, the full-brother of Tamar. He was seething mad, at Amnon, but also at his father's indifference. Absalom took his little sister into his own home, where she lived out her days, a dishonored and joyless woman.

They say revenge is a dish best served cold. Absalom never said a word to Amnon, but he hated his guts. He kept his rage to himself for two years. Then, one day during sheep-shearing season, Absalom invited all of his brothers to his house for a celebration. This was typical at that time of year. There, he ordered some of his men to murder Amnon.

Both Amnon and Absalom showed some of their father's proclivity for violent scheming. They were chips off the old block. They weren't guilty of David's sins, and he wasn't guilty of theirs, but the sins of the father had visited the children. They had learned some tricks from the old man.

Absalom ran and stayed with his maternal grandpa for three years, while David grieved every day for Amnon. At this point, the original language makes the story a little fuzzy. David wants to go to Absalom, but it is not clear whether the king wants to go to his son and be reconciled with him or to wring his neck. In any event, David doesn't want to go to Absalom badly enough to actually do anything. Joab, the commander of David's armies, makes things happen, and eventually, Absalom returns to Jerusalem. However, part of the deal is that David does not want to see him. So, for two more years, Absalom lives in his own house in Jerusalem, but he is forbidden from seeing the king. In time, however, a reconciliation of sorts takes place.

The fact that Absalom had only avenged his sister's honor made him a sympathetic, if not heroic figure in the eyes of the public. Also, he was strikingly good-looking. There were a lot of good-looking folk in David's family. Absalom knew he was gorgeous. His hair grew so thick that he only cut it when it became unwieldy. Then, he would weigh it to show how magnificent it was.

Add to public sympathy and good looks a knack for political schmooze, and we soon find Absalom building a following. Like modern politicians, he played on the people's discontent with the status quo and began to campaign as one who could run things better. The text says:

... "Absalom behaved in this way toward all the Israelites who came to the king asking for justice, and so he stole the hearts of the men of Israel." - 2 Samuel 15:6

Again, the rubble of David's sin with Bathsheba is evident. As smooth and pretty as Absalom was, could he have stolen the hearts of Israel from David had David's overall image of kingliness and justice not taken a severe blow? David was forgiven by God. But it is not enough for a believer to simply repent of specific misdeeds. He must learn to love righteousness and to hate sin, understanding that sin is a pervasive evil that defiles everything it touches.

Four more years passed before Absalom actually made an aggressive move to usurp his father's throne. Under the guise of going to Hebron to fulfill a religious vow, Absalom organized an assault on Jerusalem. Hebron was David's royal city before the nation was fully united. Perhaps, the loss of political status rendered Hebron a fertile field for the seeds of a revolution.

The conspiracy was now full-blown. One of David's most trusted advisors, Ahithophel, went over to Absalom. Ahithophel was Bathsheba's grandfather, who may have been disgusted by that whole debacle. A king he had once admired, he now despised. God is quicker to forgive our most scandalous deeds than are those around us. And, yet, what degree of disillusionment with David could have led Ahithophel to believe that placing Absalom on Israel's throne was a good idea?

David learned that Absalom had more public support than he did. Absalom was leading a bunch of hotheaded rebels. David had the best warriors. Still, David was so outnumbered that he took his household, his closest advisors and his best warriors and fled the city. He headed toward the Jordan River where he planned to hide out until two loyal priests who would remain in Jerusalem let him know what was going on. He leaves a loyal servant, Hushai the Arkite, to pretend that he is loyal to Absalom's cause, but he will really become David's mole in Absalom's court.

On his way to the river, David encounters Ziba, who approaches the king's entourage with all sorts of provisions. Remember Ziba? He was King Saul's servant who had been doing quite well for himself running the dead king's estate until David decided that he wanted to do something nice for any survivor of his old friend Jonathan, Saul's son. Mephibosheth, Jonathan's crippled son, was located and brought to Jerusalem. David restored Saul's estate to Mephibosheth. This meant that Ziba was busted back down to a servant of the estate working for Mephibosheth. He was no longer keeping any of the profits. This probably did not set well with Ziba.

David is suspicious. Where does a servant get all this stuff? He asked, "Where is Mephibosheth?" Ziba answers, "In Jerusalem. He thinks all this turmoil will result in the throne coming back to him and his family." That was probably a lie, but David is not at his best. He orders that all of Mephibosheth's property now be transferred to Ziba. That was the first of a number of hasty non-judicious decisions.

Next, David encounters a character named Shimei. This kinsman of Saul begins to pelt David with rocks, shower him with dirt and curse him. Shimei was essentially telling David that he was getting what he deserved for what he did to Saul's family years ago. Abishai, Joab's brother and another of David's generals, offered to separate this wacko from his head, but David said, "Who knows? He may be right. God may have sent him to curse me."

We tend to see this story as an example of David's humility, but it was a flawed and insecure humility. To curse the ruler of God's people was forbidden in by *JEHOVAH's* Law. God did not send Shimei to curse His Own anointed king. It was God who decreed Saul's downfall. We see, rather, the evidence of a king who is battered, bruised and a little unsure of himself. This can be the residual damage of great sin. God forgives us, but we no longer trust ourselves enough to call sin what it is. "Who am I to judge?" David whined. Sound familiar. In this particular case, Shimei's behavior already stood judged by the Law itself. David should not have let it go unanswered.

It is one thing to address sin in love. It is another to temper any correction rebuke we must offer with the grace that remembers that we too are sinners. But, David was simply unable and unwilling to address something that was clearly sin. This insecurity on the part of the leader of the nation seems to evidence that he was still damaged and wounded. God had forgiven him, but sometimes, sin leaves us too distrustful of ourselves to stand up and call things as they are.

When Absalom got to Jerusalem, David was long gone. David had left ten of his concubines to take care of the palace. Ahithophel advised Absalom that the best way to make a statement as to who was now in charge was to publicly sleep with his father's concubines. In the ancient middle-east, a king's harem was the ultimate spoil of war. So, Absalom followed this shameless advice.

Fortunately, Hushai, David's mole, was able to work his way into Absalom's confidence. A little flattery was all it took. Ahithophel, whose advice was usually considered bullet-proof, told Absalom to take 12,000 men, pursue David and destroy him while he was still reeling. It was the right advice, but, something compelled Absalom to want to hear from Hushai, who suggested that David and his men would be fearless if cornered, so Absalom should summon all the men he could from all over Israel. This, of course, took time, which bought David time.

It was surprising that Absalom would heed the advice of Hushai over that of Ahithophel, who was simply never wrong. But, the sacred text itself reveals that God's hand was all over this:

"...." For the LORD had determined to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom." - 2 Samuel 17:14

Ahithophel took Absalom's rejection of his advice pretty hard. He hanged himself. Hushai got a message to David, who in turn, prepared for battle. David crossed over the Jordan. This would slow down Absalom's advance. He raised more troops and secured more provisions. Then, David sent his forces into battle. His generals lured Absalom's inexperienced forces into a forest, and the battle was quickly over. Absalom lost 20,000 men.

Absalom tried to escape, but either his mule was too tall or the branches of a certain oak tree were too low, because his hair became tangled in the branches, and he was left hanging in the tree by his hair as his mule just kept on going. One of Joab's men saw this strange sight and reported it. Joab asked, "Why didn't you just kill Absalom then and there? I would have rewarded you." The soldier replied, "Boss, you don't have enough money for me to kill the king's son." You see, he recalled that when David sent the troops out, he had said, "Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake" (2 Samuel 18:5). It was a weird request. It was even an irritating request to his loyal troops. Still, the king had it, and the soldier had heard it.

Joab, on the other hand had no such qualms. He and his armor bearers finished off Absalom as he hung there. They tossed his rebellious carcass in a pit in the forest and covered it with rocks.

When David received the news, he wailed and carried on. That was understandable to a point, but this was still a great victory for his army, and it sort of annoyed everybody. It was as if they were supposed to feel guilty for saving the king's hide. Joab took David to task. "Get out there and thank your troops like a proper king before they all walk out on you!" This he did, but David must have resented Joab's audacity, because he would soon let Joab know who was boss.

The worst seemed over, but even as the nation was being put back together, new tensions arose. When the time came for making nice, David replaced Joab as the commander of his armies with Amasa. Now, who was Amasa? He was the general of Absalom's armies, the guy who Joab had just annihilated. Maybe, there was some political savvy to the move. The administrative shake-up certainly put Joab in his place, but this could not have made David's military very happy.

Shimei, who had pelted the king with dust and rocks, was now apologetic. Abishai still wanted to cut off his head, but David scolded him so as to put him in his place as he had his brother. David gave Shimei a pass. Interestingly, however, at the end of his days, David advised Solomon, his son and successor, to bring down Shimei for the things he had done.

Mephibosheth, the crippled son of Jonathan, whom his servant Ziba had accused of treason, was there. He said, "King, I was slandered. Ziba lied about me, and you gave all my stuff to him." Rather than get to the bottom of that rather significant issue, David just ordered that they split everything 50/50. Mephibosheth's next words suggest that he was likely the nobler servant: "Let him take everything, now that my lord the king has arrived home safely" (2 Samuel 19:30). Still, it was a rather lazy and not particularly judicious decision on King David's part.

David's own tribe of Judah ramrodded the ceremony of reinstalling David as king in Jerusalem and pretty well left the other tribes out of the planning. That ruffled more feathers.

Chapter 20 records the story of Sheba, a Benjamite who tried to fuel the tensions between Judah and the other tribes. "Since David doesn't care about you, follow me!" was the gist of his plan. So, all the malcontents followed him. David ordered his new general Amasa to gather an army, but he couldn't get it done. How could the king turn to Joab after demoting him? Instead, he called on Abishai, Joab's brother. But Joab injected himself into the situation and resolved it. He also happened to murder Amasa, the guy who took his job, but David seems not to have reacted to that at all. Now, at the end of these eight chapters, Joab is once again leading Israel's armies.

Do you see now why I didn't want to spend countless weeks dissecting this portion of David's life? We are done with that whole sordid series of events. Now what?

Think back. After David became king over a unified Israel, he took Jerusalem from the Jebusites and built it up into a great city. He drove the Philistines and all the other nations that didn't belong in Israel out of the land. He established himself as a wise and just king who taught the people how to worship God. Biblical historians refer to this period as "David's Glorious Reign."

After David's great sin, historians don't have a neat label for the remainder of his reign. Nothing on the earthly plane was ever quite the same. Had God really forgiven him?

Yes! Yes! A thousand times, Yes!
Still, his sin had made a horrible mess!

So, why does the Bible, a book we equate with God's story of redemption, take us through these dark chapters in the life of man God had already forgiven?

It may be because we need to see that the consequences of sin are bigger than us. They can leave a path of destruction that affects many more people than just ourselves. Even though sin stands forgiven and will be of no bearing in the next life, its scars often remain on this life. We must learn to avoid treating the "sin, repentance, forgiveness cycle" as a gimmick and learn to despise sin for what it is.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." When He intervened by His grace in the lives of others, He often told them to stop sinning. It is our nature to creep up as close as we can to the line that divides right from wrong. The story of the second half of David's reign is that sin, no matter how enticing, is not worth the collateral damage it can cause.

We don't put ourselves through a message like this so as to in any way doubt the extent of God's forgiveness, but to so as to see sin as the malignant thing that it is. We are pursuing a higher plane of discipleship, one that is beyond simply doing as we please and then saying, "Sorry, God," but never really learning to deny ourselves in the first place. The Roman Catholic practice of sinning and running to a priest for confession and absolution seems strange to many evangelicals, who have been doing essentially the same thing for years, only without the priest.

May our prayer today be that God would help us to discern what is good so that we might dwell on such things and despise what is vile. You died to sin. You cannot abide in it any longer.