

Sex & Healing

Well it's good to see you guys this morning. If you have your bibles, go ahead and turn with me to the Old Testament book of **2 Samuel, chapter 13**. If you need to use the table of contents in your bible for that, no judgment at all here—go right ahead. If you use one of our bibles, it's on p. 151.

We've now reached the **final week** of our series called *The God of Sex*. But before we wrap up the series, I thought it would be helpful to discuss something we've barely mentioned so far—and that's the reality of sexual abuse and sexual assault. Which definitely does mean we're ending this series on a somber note. Normally, we like to try and keep parts of each teaching somewhat light, with humor and good ol' self-deprecation and things of that nature. Just as a heads up, there won't be really any of that today. I don't think that sort of thing is really *possible* with this topic, nor would it be *appropriate*. Things aren't normally this serious on Sundays, but I feel like this particular subject calls for *exactly* that.

To be honest, I sat down to write this teaching about 4 or 5 times, and each time got about fifteen minutes in and **just broke down**. And I think that's because for me, this isn't just an *issue*, but is deeply personal. When I talk about sexual assault, I'm thinking of friends of mine, people in our church, even *biological family members* of mine. I know for many of you it's very similar—either you or someone very close to you have been affected by sexual assault. So *one* of my goals this morning is to make it through the teaching without breaking down throughout the whole thing. If I do, I did bring some Kleenexes up here—and we also provided a box on the end of each row if you need them.

But on that note, I'd love to **pray for us** all this morning before we begin:

Father, we are fully aware today that there are a lot of things in our world that aren't as they should be. We hate that we live in a world where sexual assault and abuse exist. We hate that sin has so corrupted the hearts of individuals that they would commit such an devastating thing against others. And I know that many of us in this room have been personally affected by that reality, and so this morning I pray would be helpful. I have no expectation that anything I say will magically "fix" any of us in the room or take away any of what we've experienced—but I do pray that it would be helpful. I pray that you would for many people, at least begin the process of healing and restoration. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sexual assault is **defined** by the U.S. Department of Health as simply "any unwanted sexual activity." Another popular definition with a little more detail is "any type of sexual behavior or contact where consent is not freely given or obtained and is accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, coercion, manipulation, threat, deception, or abuse of authority." So any sexual behavior or contact accomplished through any of those means. In terms of **occurrences**, sexual assault is far more common than many people realize. The most recent statistics say that one in four women and one in six men will be sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime.¹ But those numbers are almost certainly low because of how underreported sexual assault obviously is.

¹ Holcomb, Justin & Lindsay, *Rid of My Disgrace*, Crossway, p. 31.

Culturally, this month marks the one year anniversary of the nationwide #MeToo movement, where survivors are calling abusers to task for their part in committing and covering up instances of sexual assault. Unfortunately, far too often, at least in people's minds, the movement has become intertwined in politics. But let's be very, very clear—for followers of Jesus, sexual assault is not a political issue—it is a human dignity issue.

What compounds the issue is that far too often, the Church has made things worse instead of better. Just last month, a Pennsylvania grand jury found that more than 300 Catholic priests had molested more than 1000 children, and that isn't by any means the first time something like that has happened. In January of this year, right here in our own state, a Memphis pastor was discovered to have sexually assaulted a high school student when he was a youth minister. Just a few years back, two Knoxville-area pastors were arrested in a sex sting for their sexually inappropriate and exploitative relationships with children.

And even when the Church isn't guilty of it, we are too often silent about it, which doesn't help either. I can't tell you how many people, upon hearing that we'd do a whole week of this series about sexual assault, told me they had never heard a church talk about sexual assault before. Which, if I'm completely honest, is baffling to me. It destroys me to know that because of the damage I know the silence is causing. Now, I by no means can fix all of those problems today. Anything that I say up here today at best, is just a drop in the bucket. But my hope is that we can at least start a conversation about it in our church. My hope is that by talking about it today we can at least push back against the culture of silence on the topic.

Now, the way we're going to go about that is by actually reading an account of sexual assault from the bible, in 2 Samuel 13. Now, I realize reading something like this may be very difficult for many of us to do—especially if you have experienced sexual assault yourself. And I am sorry for that, but know that I'm not doing it arbitrarily. If you can hang in there with me, I can promise there's a reason we're walking through a story like this one. I think this story actually shows us a lot about the nature of sexual assault, the damage it causes, and I think points us in a helpful direction as to what to do in response to it. As we read through it, I'll stop periodically and make some observations about what's going on that I hope will be helpful. If you haven't experienced sexual assault yourself, I also think there's tremendous insight into the reality of sexual assault to be heard in this passage. I think it can actually teach us a lot.

So let's take a look at 2 Samuel 13, starting in v. 1:

[1] In the course of time, Amnon son of David fell in love with Tamar, the beautiful sister of Absalom son of David.

So Amnon, son of the king of Israel, takes notice of his half-sister Tamar. And right out of the gate, we're reminded of one very ugly fact about sexual assault: the abuser is very often someone the victim knows. The stereotype of a dark, shadowy, unknown figure in a public setting isn't actually all that common. It certainly happens, but most perpetrators of assault are someone familiar to the victim,²

² Callie Marie Rennison, *National Crime Victimization Survey: Criminal Victimization 2001* (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2002), 8.

and sometimes even a member of their family. Here in the story, it's Tamar's half-brother Amnon. It says that Amnon "fell in love" with Tamar. But we quickly find out this isn't any type of attraction—something is deeply wrong here. We see that starting in v. 2:

*[2] Amnon became so obsessed with his sister Tamar **that he made himself ill. She was a virgin**, and it seemed impossible for him to do anything to her.*

So this is more like **a warped obsession** with her than it is a genuine romantic desire. He is specifically just attracted to her sexually, and doesn't care about much beyond her appearance and sexuality. We can see that in his obsession over the fact that she's a virgin. Keep reading, v. 3:

*[3] Now Amnon had an **adviser named Jōnadab** son of Shimeah, David's brother. [so essentially, Amnon's cousin.] Jōnadab was a very shrewd man. [4] He asked Amnon, "Why do you, the king's son, look so haggard morning after morning? Won't you tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I'm in love with Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." [5] [So Jonadab responds], "**Go to bed and pretend to be ill. 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.'**"*

So Amnon goes and tells his friend Jonadab about his obsession, and they **immediately start scheming** on how Amnon can use his power and position to take advantage of Tamar. And then Amnon puts the plan into motion, v. 6:

*[6] So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. When the king came to see him, Amnon said to him, "**I would like my sister Tamar** to come and make some special bread in my sight, so I may eat from her hand." [7] David sent word to **Tamar** at the palace: "Go to the house of your brother Amnon and prepare some food for him." [8] **So Tamar went to the house of her brother Amnon, who was lying down.** She took some dough, kneaded it, made the bread in his sight and baked it. [9] Then she took the pan and served him the bread, but he refused to eat. "**Send everyone out of here**," Amnon said. So everyone left him [it's now just him and Tamar alone] [10] Then Amnon said to Tamar, "**Bring the food here into my bedroom** so I may eat from your hand." And Tamar took the bread she had prepared and brought it to her brother Amnon **in his bedroom.***

In sexual assault, **the abuser will often use the victim's trust, as a weapon** against them. Sometimes the reason abusers are able to assault someone they *know* is because they manipulate and take advantage of that person's *trust*. So in the story, when Tamar comes to serve Amnon some bread, she thinks nothing of it because she *trusts* him. When he sends *everyone else* out of the room but her, she thinks nothing of it *because she trusts* him. When he tells her to bring the food into his bedroom, she does, because again, *she has no reason to believe he has ulterior motives*. **She trusts him, and he uses that trust against her.**

Keep reading, **v. 11**:

[11] *But when she took it to him to eat, he grabbed her and said, “Come to bed with me, my sister.”* [12] *“No, my brother!” she said to him. “Don’t force me! Such a thing should not be done in Israel! Don’t do this wicked thing.*

Make no mistake about it: sexual assault is a *wicked* thing. It isn’t a misunderstanding, it isn’t a mistake, it isn’t “boys being boys,” it’s not a lapse in judgment—it’s not any of those things. **It is a wicked act of violence by one person, against another person.** It is making another human being an victim of violence. It’s seeing them as an object to satisfy your desires and impulses. It is, without a doubt, a *wicked thing*. A fact that Tamar is well aware of. Now, look at the questions she asks, v. 13:

[13] *What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace?*

I want us to **camp out for a second on this question** that Tamar asks. When faced with the reality of her brother sexually assaulting her, she asks this question: **“(if you do this) where could I get rid of my disgrace?”** *Disgrace*. I think that word is such a fitting word to describe what sexual assault is. And here’s why I say that. The word *grace*, if you’ve been around Church for any amount of time, means what? It means “unmerited favor.” Unmerited (or *undeserved*) favor. Grace is getting something incredible that you didn’t deserve at all. Well, **if grace is getting something incredible that you didn’t deserve, then sexual assault is exactly the opposite: it’s getting something horrible that you didn’t deserve. It’s dis-grace. If grace is something undeservedly wonderful, sexual assault is something undeservedly terrible.**

And so the question Tamar asks is “if you do this, where will I get rid of that disgrace?” “How will I rid myself of this horrifying thing?” For so many survivors that I have talked to, **that is the question lingering** their minds: “how in the world can I ever get rid of what I feel as a result of all this?” How will this ever go away? How will this ever not affect so many other things in my life, so many other relationships that I have? **Where can I get rid of all this?** That’s the question so many survivors are asking. More on that in just a bit. For now, Tamar goes on, second half of 13...

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.”

So I know this part may seem weird to us, but what’s likely happening here is that she is just **trying anything and everything** she can to get out of the situation. She’s already tried reasoning with Amnon, and now she’s just saying anything she can to get out of there. If she can get him to wait and talk to the king about “marrying” her, that means she can flee to safety while he does that.

[14] *But he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her.*

You know, for all the examples in the world of people covering up sexual assault, especially when it’s a public figure, the bible has no interest in covering *anything* up. It tells it exactly like it happened. Because Amnon is such a prominent figure—a son of the great Israelite king David—how easy would it have been to say “well, you know there was an ‘incident’ between the son of the king and Tamar and we’re not exactly sure what happened”? But instead it tells it bluntly, just like it happened.

And then there's this phrase, "since he was stronger than she." Most of the time, sexual assault involves a **power differential** from abuser to victim. This is why it's so unhelpful to ask questions of a survivor like "why didn't you fight back?" The assumption there is 1) that they *didn't* try to fight back (which they very well may have), and 2) they had the *ability* and *strength* to. Neither of those may be the true. It's an unhelpful question to ask. Look at v. 15:

[15] Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, "Get up and get out!"

In this verse, Amnon embodies the very core of what sexual assault is—it is using a person as an object, and then **discarding** them afterwards. It's the complete indifference to the other person's humanity—to their status as an image bearer of God. That's what assault is. Her response, v. 16:

[16] "No!" she said to him. "Sending me away would be a greater wrong than what you have already done to me." But he refused to listen to her. [Don't know if you've noticed but that's the second time the author used that phrase. Could there be a more succinct description of the problem of sexual assault than "he refused to listen to her"?] [17] He called his personal servant and said, "Get this woman out of my sight and bolt the door after her." [18] So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her.

Amnon calls his servant and says get "this woman"—he doesn't even call her by name—"out of my sight." And he gets exactly what he wants. His *personal servant* comes and takes care of it all for him. So *Amnon—the abuser—gets protection while Tamar—the one in need of protection—gets carted away. She gets disgrace and he just moves on with his life. How many times have we seen that scenario play out? Far too often, the system is rigged in favor of those in power—in other words, the abuser. And look at what happens next, second half of v. 18...*

*She was wearing an ornate robe, for **this was the kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore.** [19] Tamar put ashes on her head and **tore** the ornate robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went.*

This part might also seem a bit odd, but it was just an **ancient form of mourning**. **Tamar is acting out on the outside what she feels on the inside. Her innocence, purity, her sexuality feels like it has been ripped to shreds by what happened, and so she physically tears apart the robe that represents all those things.** And she goes away weeping. Then, take a look at v. 20:

*[20] Her brother Absalom said to her, "Has that Amnon, your brother, been with you? **Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart.**" And Tamar lived in her brother Absalom's house, a desolate woman.*

Absalom, knowing that something is wrong, **says** to Tamar **one of the most destructive things** that so many survivors hear after assault, the words "be quiet about this." I can't tell you how many stories I have heard of sexual assault where even when the survivor works up the unbelievable amount of courage it takes to tell somebody, the first response they get is "hey, let's not tell anybody else about this." "Who have you told so far?" "Let's not make a big deal out of this." "Let's not damage this other person's reputation." That so often is what survivors here and it's so incredibly destructive.

But here's **what's ironic** about the story—Absalom actually ends up taking revenge on Amnon for what he did to Tamar. Two years later, Absalom actually murders Amnon as a result of all this. But what's ironic is that *it doesn't help Tamar*. Sure he avenges her, but it doesn't actually bring her any healing. **Justice is attempted, but it doesn't undo her pain**. So even though in some way, Absalom thinks he's helping, he's actually not. And in the moment when Tamar *most needs* Absalom's help, he silences her.

And here's one reason **why it's so harmful to silence survivors: it solidifies the shame and isolation that they already feel**. You have just implied to them that their abuser's reputation, that the status quo is more important than their own healing. You've just suggested that one of the most devastating things in their life is not a big enough deal to talk about. And perhaps worse, you very well may have implied they're lying about what happened. By doing things like this, you are often pushing the survivor further into isolation, which they already feel *unbelievable* amounts of.

And in the story, **that's precisely what happens**. As a result of what all of this, and as a result of not being able to talk about it, it says Tamar "lived in her brother Absalom's house, a *desolate* woman." That word there can be translated *desolate* or *devastated*. From what I'm told, those both are fitting words to describe what survivors often feel. They feel forever changed for the worse. **They feel desolate, devastated, by what happened to them. They may begin to feel that their trauma is now one of the most defining parts of their identity. Like it is a lens that distorts every other experience they have.**

And part of **the reason that survivors feel that way** is because they have actually had someone *else's* sin, *placed onto* them. That's what sexual assault is. **It is to have the abuser's sin—their lust, their objectification, their violence—it's to have all that placed onto you as the survivor. It's to have to carry the effect of another person's sin on your own shoulders. And with it, the shame, the filthiness, the dirtiness that only that person should be carrying. You now unjustly now have to experience what only they should have to experience.** And it's extremely difficult to know what to do with that as a survivor. ~~If you're follower of Jesus, you have a framework for what to do about shame from your own sin. But what do we do about shame from someone else's sin? It's hard to know what to do with that.~~ So in response, it's easy to feel *desolate*. *Desolate* because it seems like *no one knows what you are feeling*. No one else *understands* what you're experiencing.

But here is precisely where **the gospel comes into play**. Because **Scripture tells us that there is someone who has experienced someone else's sin on their shoulders**. Someone who has unjustly experienced another person's shame. **Although Jesus may not have experienced sexual assault specifically, he certainly knows what it feels like to experience shame that wasn't his own. Isaiah 53 tells us that "the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all."** Even though the sin wasn't his own, though he did not deserve it in the least, Jesus experienced that sin being placed onto his shoulders.

And not only that, but also **everything that came with it**. He experienced the *shame*, the *desolation*, the *devastation* of another person's sin. He experienced the *isolation* when every close friend he had turned on him. He experienced the *unjustness* of systems and structures of his day being rigged against him and in favor of those in power. He experienced being *silenced* by those in authority. And even on a physical level, he experienced the *shame* of being *stripped naked* and being *powerless* while people

hurled their hatred and violence at him. **While Jesus may not have experienced exactly what you experienced, he has experienced strikingly similar things.**

Here's the way **the rest of Isaiah 53** puts it:

*He was **oppressed and afflicted**, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of **his generation** protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; **for the transgression of my people** he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though **he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.***

Jesus may not have experienced the exact thing you experienced, but he can certainly identify with a lot of it. He knows how it feels to do nothing wrong and still experience the shame of someone who *did*. *He knows what that feels like.* **And so to you, survivor of sexual assault in room, though it might feel like no one else in the world knows what you're feeling, Jesus looks at you with tears in his eyes and says "I do. I know."** And that's where the hope lies for us as followers of Jesus. Not that Jesus offers us some sort of easy fix or quick solution for something like this—but that he sees us in the depths of our pain and our suffering and our devastation and says "I get it. I know."

One thing that I find so very helpful about the message of Jesus is that in it, God is no stranger to suffering. In every other world religion I know of, God or the gods remain in the comforts of another realm, *distant from suffering*. **In Jesus, God himself experiences suffering. He makes himself a victim of the brokenness of the world. He chooses to suffer at the hands of wicked, unjust human beings. God himself comes and allows himself to be wronged by the very creatures he created.**

And in doing that, he actually **deals with all sin**, including sexual assault. In that moment he took the shame and the disgrace you experienced as a survivor and he broke the *power* of that too. It no longer has to be the most defining thing about you. It no longer has to be the lens through which you see the world. His work on the cross provided the foundation upon which you can heal. It will be a process, it will take time, but because of Jesus it is possible.

But for survivors, **that's not the end of the hope** we have through Jesus. It's not *just* that Jesus identifies with us, and it's not *just* that he makes healing possible. It actually goes even further than that. I want you to look on the screen at a passage with me from **Isaiah 25**. In this passage, Isaiah is describing the day in the future where all forms of injustice are *eradicated* from the earth—which certainly includes that of sexual assault. He's describing the day when Jesus sets things right once and for all. Here's how he describes that day:

*[8] he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the **tears** from all faces; he will remove his people's [look at that next word] **disgrace** from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.*

That word "disgrace" is the exact same word Tamar used in our passage. You see, **Isaiah answers the question that Tamar asked.** Before Amnon did what he did, she asked him, "if you do this, where will I get of my disgrace?" Isaiah says "*here's* where you get rid of your disgrace." God promises that there is a

day coming on the horizon when *complete healing* will happen. When disgrace will be gone for *good* for the people of God. Where for followers of Jesus, he will wipe away *every* tear from *every* face. Where, in the words of the great J.R.R. Tolkien, “all sad things will come untrue.” **There will come a day where your disgrace, your shame, will be taken away from you for good. The one thing that feels like it will not ever go away, will be put away forever. So hear me: Jesus identifies with you, he provides a path towards healing now, and one day he will heal for good.** That is the good news for survivors of sexual assault.

So before we close, I'd like to just **speak to two different groups of people**. First, to those of you who have *experienced* sexual assault; and second, to those of you in the room who may have someone *confide in you* about *being* sexually assaulted. First, to the survivors.

To Survivors

To the survivors in the room, I will start off by saying what I said a few weeks ago: **I am sorry**. I am sorry that we live in a world where this exists. I'm sorry we live in a world where this happened to you and I'm sorry we live in a world where you feel like you can't tell anybody about it. I'm sorry if you *have* told someone and they responded in unhelpful ways, and I'm sorry that we as a society largely have still not learned how to respond well.

But what I'd offer to you: **when you're ready**, when you feel like you *can*, tell somebody. Specifically, it may be helpful to tell *someone* in our church family. Not because we're going to respond *perfectly*—but because we're going to try to respond *well*. One of the worst things about sexual assault is often the isolation. It's how alone you feel in it all. And we with everything in us want you to not feel alone. So when you're ready, and when you feel like you can, tell one of us.

There's a few different **ways that can happen**. If you're in one of our LifeGroups, your **LifeGroup leader** would be a great person to tell. They have been equipped with some resources and been coached up on how to respond well, and they would love to make themselves available to talk to you about it. They'd love to not only listen, but then to walk alongside you in whatever next steps you decide together would be helpful. If you're here and you're not in a LifeGroup, and really want to talk to someone, we will be glad to connect you to someone in the next 24 hours, just let us know.

~~You may have already told somebody, and it doesn't feel like it's helping. That doesn't make you a bad Christian, that doesn't mean you're *not* a Christian. You may just need to continue in that process, or there may just need to be additional means required to help heal.~~

And **if you're not ready today**, that's fine—more than anything I just want you to know that our church desires to be a safe place for you whenever you're ready to talk about it. We are here and we want to listen. I am positive we won't respond *perfectly*, but we want to respond *well*.

To Others

And on that note, to others of us who might ever have someone confide in us about their experience with sexual assault. Let me just real quickly give you a few things **not to say**, and a few things **to say**:

Things **not to say** are things like “I know exactly how you feel.” “I understand.” Those things sometimes are natural instincts, but especially if you haven’t experienced sexual assault, it can seem like you’re trying to minimize their experience. Not to mention, **every person experiences the aftermath of sexual assault a little differently**. So there’s a good chance even if you have had something *similar happen* to you, you still may actually not know how they feel. In addition, don’t say things like “You’ll get over this” or “it will all be okay” or “be positive.” Sexual assault takes way more than just positive thinking to deal with it. So just telling them to think a certain way or be optimistic isn’t very helpful. And please, please please, avoid Christian cliches like “this was God’s will” or “God is going to use this.” Whatever your theology, *even if you think you’re making a true theological statement*, that absolutely is not what that person needs to hear in that moment. Those are some things *not* to say.

That being said, here are some **helpful** things to say. Some **things to say** are things like “I’m sorry this happened to you.” Things like “thank you for trusting me with this.” Things like “this wasn’t your fault.” Things like “it’s okay to cry,” or even “I’d love to cry with you.” In my experience, one of the most helpful things is “things may not ever be the same, but they can get better.” And then, once you’ve processed some with them, maybe a question like “how can I help?”

How we respond to sexual assault is so incredibly important. It has the potential to set survivors on a path towards healing. So let’s be so incredibly intentional with how we approach it. It also has the potential to show a broken world a better way forward in how we talk about and respond to sexual assault. Which is something that our culture is evidently in dire need of. So let’s, as the people of Jesus, be that example for them.

In closing, I pray that at least some of today is helpful to those of you in the room who are survivors of sexual assault, and to those that you will confide in about your experience. More than anything, I want you to know that **healing is possible**. It likely will not be easy or quick, but it can happen. Jesus desires to walk with you throughout that process. We, as *representations of Jesus*, desire to walk with you throughout that process. I pray that Jesus continues to heal, redeem and restore in and among our church family. Let’s pray together.