

TWISTED LOVE—FAMILY SECRETS, LIES AND HEARTACHES

Surviving Rape and Abuse

2 Samuel 13:1-19

Dr. Doyle Sager, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/twisted-love-surviving-rape-and-abuse/>

According to research, in America today, one in every four girls will experience sexual abuse or assault by the age of 17 [girlsinc.org]. Look around you this morning and do the math. Of course, we learned today from our scripture reading—this is not a new issue. In our Bible text, King David's firstborn, Amnon, is crown prince, and feels pretty entitled. He lusts after his half-sister, Tamar. He forces himself on her. She resists and in v. 12, begs him to respect her, to respect himself and the finest traditions of Israel. But he overpowers her. There are no witnesses. In a flash of psychological insight, the narrator tells us that suddenly, after the horrible deed, Amnon hates her as much as he had wanted her. In projecting his own shame on her, his lust turned to disgust, as if he is the injured party!

There are typically two common strategies used by an attacker on a victim: blaming the victim and isolating the victim. Perhaps we don't realize how Tamar's life forever changed in these moments. Her shame and social stigma were enormous. She could no longer live with her sisters in the King's court. She is alone. She rips her clothes and puts ashes on her head, signifying a death, deep grief. No hope. If you've ever talked with victims of sexual assault/abuse, they will tell you—it feels as if their future has been taken from them. Something died inside.

To compound things, the two men in her life who mean the most to her, fail her. First, her full brother Absalom simply says, "Just stay quiet about it; don't let it get to you" (v. 20). The other significant male in her life, her father, King David, did nothing. He didn't punish or reprimand his son Amnon at all. As Tony Cartledge has written, David did nothing to Amnon and nothing for Tamar [Cartledge, p. 539]. In reality, the two things an abuse or assault victim needs is to be given voice and to have allies.

Here are some of the inner feelings of trauma victims (rape, abuse, assault): shame, self-blame, self-criticism, betrayal, anger, guilt, alienation [Turow, p. 193]. Sexual trauma depersonalizes and degrades the victim. A therapist once told a woman, victimized by years of abuse, "You don't have a category, a mental file, big enough for this. The trauma actually alters brain chemistry."

Remember our verse from last week, Psalm 12:5, "Says the LORD, 'I will place them in safety for which they long.'" Judith Herman, who has written extensively about trauma recovery, says that recovery comes in three parts [Herman, p. 135]. Interestingly, these three steps give us, the church, guidance on where to begin. 1)

SAFETY: We need to continually teach our children good touch/bad touch, and the power of consent [Stephens-Reed]. As the psalm says, God's desire is our safety and every human is entitled to that.

2) SPACE TO REMEMBER AND MOURN: The church must make it as easy as possible for victims to tell their stories. Without that permission and encouragement, they will never heal—spiritually, emotionally and in some cases, physically. What's more, if they don't tell their stories, the perpetrators are more emboldened.

3) RECONNECTION WITH LIFE/ COMMUNITY: The only counterweight to cruelty is compassion [Walter Kasper, p. 29]. And through God's love poured out in Jesus Christ, we have abundant access to compassion. And remember how Jesus treated women, children, the vulnerable. Other people are not disposable sex objects for our gratification, but created in God's image. We need to say to victims, "This is not your fault; there is help; there is hope!" The church needs to partner with community agencies to make sure that it is one and not the other!

When my little brother was very small, he loved a little Panda Bear doll. He called him Andy Panda. Carried him everywhere. One day, the dog chewed up Andy and rearranged his entire anatomy. Dennis cried and cried and cried. But our dear mother sewed and improvised. She stitched him up again. Andy now had stitches, but he survived. Our scars never leave, but we CAN live again after abuse. Survive and thrive!

Years ago, a pastor-friend of mine opened up about the sexual abuse he had endured as a child. "As painful as it has been to open those doors, when I do, I not only find pain and release but also find God is there, too."

SOURCES CITED:

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