

Consequences – August 23, 2015

2 Samuel 18

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It's a regrettable story. It's an all-too-common story. It's a story about how our past choices, for good or for ill, will influence our present and future.

When last we saw King David, his past choices had caught up with him. To summarize. The king's army was out in the countryside waging war. The idle king spotted an attractive woman and allowed lust to control his choices. David sent for Bathsheba, brought her to his room, and raped her. The result, pregnancy. To cover his sin, and after 2 failed attempts to get Bathsheba's husband Uriah to come home to her, David ordered his general to place Uriah on the front lines, ensuring his death.

Following the death of Uriah, David wed Bathsheba. The king's prophet Nathan confronted David with his sin using a parable. David saw the magnitude of his sin, repented and sought forgiveness. Nathan told David that God would spare his life, but the life of the child would be taken and David's house would be plagued with violence and bloodshed. And it was.

Now before digging deeper into the story of David, I want to look at the pronouncement made by Nathan on God's behalf. Certainly a statement of judgment. God saw what David had done – lust, rape, adultery, murder – and saw it as evil. God didn't like what David had done. Not one little bit. And the prophet proclaimed that Bathsheba's baby would die, and David's household would remain in turmoil.

Does God kill innocent babies as punishment for the sins of the father? Does God send family dysfunction as penalty for sin?

I can still remember, following the devastation by Hurricane Katrina years ago, how some fundamentalist preacher – I think it was Pat Robertson – made the pronouncement that the destruction of New Orleans was God's reaction to the debauchery of the city. In fact, any number of horrific disasters are labeled as some type of punishment for whomever they strike. Watch what you're doing, because God might zap you if he catches you sinning! This is the reason why many thoughtful Christians have trouble reading the Old Testament. God is often portrayed as a wrathful deity, ready to strike out with righteous vengeance. Now granted, fear of punishment can be a pretty effective motivator for keeping people on the straight and narrow. If something bad happens to you, well, you probably deserve it. You're a bad person. Now if you're a good person and something bad happens, this line of theology wants us to believe that God is testing you.

Yeah. That really doesn't work. For one, that perspective simply is not consistent with the God of love and mercy that Jesus refers to as Abba, Father.

But also, if we subscribe to this system of Godly punishment and testing, we have to also accept that God is arbitrary. God punishes some but a whole host of others get off scot free. How does God chose who gets punished and who can get away with it? And what about all the innocents who get caught as bystanders? How do we justify the millions of innocent children who are hungry every day or who are sold into the sex trade? Or the millions of people who are struck by debilitating diseases or live in places of extreme violence?

I think we need to take into account the mindset of the early biblical writers. They were writing after the fact – sometimes centuries after the fact – looking back on deeds and consequences – and putting their own theological spin on what happened. If we look at the Torah, the Jewish Law we see that sin has penalty. People sin, get caught, and are punished by those who adjudicate the law. So why wouldn't the people believe that bad things occur because someone sinned? Isn't God the ultimate judge?

Yes, but it is a judgment tempered by mercy and love. God is not a vengeful punisher. But God will allow actions to play out to their natural consequences. And that is what we see over and over again in David's story.

Now, over the summer, you all have probably learned more about David than you ever knew. By now you have realized that he is not a moral model for us to follow. What makes David so special is certainly not his righteousness. He blunders through life just like the rest of us. What makes David special is his faithfulness. His faith in God is what sets him apart as one to respect.

So back to his story. Nathan pronounces judgment on David, which means that the actions David committed will naturally proceed to their consequences. Bathsheba's baby did die. An absolutely devastating event. But not a punishment. Never a punishment.

And David's house was struck with years of dysfunction. You have heard it said, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Here's the condensed version: David's son Amnon lusted after his sister Tamar. He couldn't get the thought out of his head (sound familiar?). Through a ruse of illness, he got her to nurse him in his room, but he turned on her and raped her. Following the rape, his lust turned to hatred, and he scorned her. Another son of David, Absalom was furious by the rape of Tamar and that his father did nothing to punish Amnon, the heir to the throne.

Absalom's anger festered for two years, and he finally had his vengeance and killed his rapist half-brother. Absalom fled the city of Jerusalem, fearing his father's reaction.

David mourned the murder of his son Amnon. But he was divided in his feelings for Absalom. He despised the murder, yet he longed to have his son back. His grief impacted his ability to rule properly and so General Joab convinced David to let Absalom come back. David agreed with one stipulation. He never wanted to set eyes upon his son.

While Absalom was back in the city, he gained followers until he amassed his own army. He was a handsome man and charismatic. People loved him. He loved himself. He plotted against his father and took the throne, causing David to go into exile. Battles ensued, bringing us to our reading for today. David, as a father, wanted to spare his son's life even though he was a traitor. Joab, ever the general, made the military decision to kill Absalom and rid David of his rival.

The reading ends with David's inconsolable grief.

What makes David's story so compelling is its humanness. We've seen him in his humble origins, the youngest of several brothers, a shepherd boy, chosen by God and anointed by Samuel the prophet to be the next king. Throughout his journey we have witnessed his passion for God, his respect and devotion to others, and his human failings. He never lost his faith. Oh, it got buried under his own

desires a time or two. But he never saw his achievements as his own. It was always God working through him. He always turned to God for counsel and guidance. His faithfulness set him apart.

And as we find him today, in this pit of tremendous grief, we are struck by his words. "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" And layered in these words of deepest anguish, are feelings of regret and longing, memories and dreams left unrealized, despair and bargaining. If I could only take your place...We know these feelings. We have been there.

And an internal emptiness. A massive hole left by years of loss. An immense pain. And where is God? Did Nathan's prophesy against David come true? Did God plot and plan all these years of familial grief, pain and betrayal as punishment for David's sins against Bathsheba and Uriah? Was God's wrath satisfied by the heartbreak of, not a king against a traitor, but as a father for a son? Might we see a similar scene a few centuries into the future, another beloved son, David's great, great, great, many times great grandson, killed out of ignorance for political reasons? Where is God? I'd like to believe that God is right there. In the grief. In our grief. Filling the emptiness.