

2 SAMUEL 13:1-19

WHEN LOVE TURNS TO LUST

“Absalom, David’s son, had a beautiful sister, whose name was Tamar. And after a time Amnon, David’s son, loved her. And Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend, whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David’s brother. And Jonadab was a very crafty man. And he said to him, ‘O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?’ Amnon said to him, ‘I love Tamar, my brother Absalom’s sister.’ Jonadab said to him, ‘Lie down on your bed and pretend to be ill. And when your father comes to see you, say to him, “Let my sister Tamar come and give me bread to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, that I may see it and eat it from her hand.”’ So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. And when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, ‘Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand.’

“David sent home to Tamar, saying, ‘Go to your brother Amnon’s house and prepare food for him.’ So Tamar went to her brother Amnon’s house, where he was lying down. And she took dough and kneaded it and made cakes in his sight and baked the cakes. And she took the pan and emptied it out before him, but he refused to eat. And Amnon said, ‘Send out everyone from me.’ So everyone went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, ‘Bring the food into the chamber, that I may eat from your hand.’ And Tamar took the cakes she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, ‘Come, lie with me, my sister.’ She answered him, ‘No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this outrageous thing. As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the outrageous fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you.’ But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her.

“Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, ‘Get up! Go!’ But she said to him, ‘No, my brother, for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me.’ But he would not listen to her. He called the young man who served him and said, ‘Put this woman out of my presence and bolt the door after her.’ Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves, for thus were the virgin daughters of the king dressed. So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore. And she laid her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went.”¹

It is sometimes said that women exchange sex for love, and men exchange love for sex. Obviously, women are not men; and men are not women; thankfully, the sexes differ. Undoubtedly, men must be taught to love selflessly, to give of themselves without expecting anything in return, and women must be taught to be chaste, exhibiting a submissive demeanour. The Bible presents just such instruction in multiple instances.

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Should we be surprised that when boys are not trained to treat women with respect and consideration, they grow up to be brutes? Is it actually a surprise to learn that when girls are not taught to respect men, especially their husbands, they become catty tyrants? Tragically, we have entered a day in which courtesies once taken for granted are no longer generally present in society, and children are not trained to think of others first. Whiny pleas for children to “be nice” delivered by social engineers who parade as educators and by parents who fail in their divinely assigned responsibility to train up their children in the way they should go, fail to instil moral standards that honour God. We have developed an education system that is focused on teaching children to expect their rights, without teaching them to accept their responsibilities. A general assumption that appears to guide modern education is that people will be ruled by their lusts, and children cannot therefore be expected to control their dark desires.

The evidence for such a dismal contention lies in the insistence of educators on implementing “sex” education that is based on the assumption that children cannot remain chaste until marriage, and that people will not be monogamous after marriage. The assumption becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when there is no encouragement within society for chastity or for acting with restraint toward those of the opposite sex.

In addition to providing sound instruction in righteousness, including avoiding a licentious or lascivious lifestyle or warning against proving to be wanton or unprincipled toward one’s fellow citizens, the Word of God provides some powerful examples of lives that were destroyed by a voluptuous or sybaritic life. Among those whose lives were ruined through dissipation and surrender to their baser self was a young man who stood in line to be king over Israel. In the process of destroying his life, he destroyed the life of many others as well.

THE GENESIS OF A RAPE — The rape of Tamar actually began with the seduction of a woman by her father long before she was violated. David seduced Bathsheba, resulting in an unplanned pregnancy. When he learned she was pregnant, he attempted to cover over his sin by recalling her husband from the front, where he was fighting against the enemies of the kingdom as one of the king’s loyal soldiers. Uriah, however, was devoted to his sovereign, and refused to indulge himself by sleeping with his wife at a time of war.

Though David attempted to trick him into sleeping with his wife, so he would not realise that the child with which his wife was pregnant was not his own, Uriah remained true to his liege. When it became evident that Uriah would not sully his fidelity to his king, David ordered that he be murdered through a stratagem of withdrawing support during an unnecessary and deliberately dangerous assault against the city walls.

Of course, as each of us is surely aware, David’s plan worked to perfection. Uriah was killed—murdered, to be precise—and David magnanimously took Bathsheba as his wife.² His heinous deed was covered, and no one was any the wiser. In fact, he had engineered the deed so that he appeared to be a hero, rescuing the lady in distress who was grieved over the death of her husband. However, there is a single sentence with which that chapter concludes that indicates that what is seen was not indicative of the true state of affairs. The chapter concludes by noting, “But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord” [2 SAMUEL 11:27b].

God sent His prophet to confront David. Nathan drew David out when through a stratagem he manoeuvred the king, stunning him with the forthright charge, “You are the man” [2 SAMUEL 12:7a]! These awful words were followed with a clear statement of culpability from God’s servant, which is found in 2 SAMUEL 12:7b-12.

² The account of this sordid affair is recounted in detail in 2 SAMUEL 11:1-26.

“Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, “I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. And I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.” Thus says the LORD, “Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.””

It never goes well for the one who has incurred God’s displeasure. Certainly, it did not go well for David. The child that Bathsheba bore for nine months died soon after birth. The heartache of the baby’s death was the first of a series of trip-hammer blows that would tear his family to shreds, drive the king from the security of his throne, humiliate him by knowing that his own wives would be ravaged by his own son, and even plunge the kingdom into a civil war. Within David’s immediate family, a number of his children would suffer disgrace and even death—all because of his wanton choice to sin against God.

How dark was the prophecy that the sword would not depart from his house! How awful the knowledge that one from within his own household would rise up against him! How dreadful the divine pledge that David would be publicly humiliated. Whenever a child of God sins, God will not permit that man or that woman to hide the sin—He will expose His own child. The divine axiom states:

“Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper,
but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.

[PROVERBS 28:13]

In his defence, Job spoke of the most despicable sins he could imagine, by implication denying that he had ever done any of the things named. As he builds to a crescendo, he names the most dreadful sin imaginable, and suddenly stops, realising that it is useless to defend himself against people who are ignorant of what was happening in his life. Listen to the suffering saint, however, as he speaks of awful sins in the life of a child of God.

“If I have covered my transgressions as men do,
by hiding iniquity in my heart,
because I was terrified of the great multitude,
and the contempt of families terrified me,
so that I remained silent
and would not go outdoors—³

[JOB 31:33, 34]

It is a terrible sin to attempt to hide one’s sin, and all the more horrifying when one remains silent out of fear of what mere mortals might say. God, however, will not permit His child to hide sin, pretending that all is well when sin has stained the life of His precious child. Indeed,

³ NET Bible

“The fear of man lays a snare.”

[PROVERBS 29:25a]

Confess sin so that the Lord may cover it. For if you attempt to cover your sin you will have sinned against the Lord, and you may “be sure your sin will find you out” [NUMBERS 32:23].

THE ACCOUNT OF THE RAPE — The sordid incident recounted in the passage before us begins because a young man believes himself in love. The one whom he “loved” was his sister. The story is set with this description: “Absalom, David’s son, had a beautiful sister, whose name was Tamar. And after a time Amnon, David’s son, loved her. And Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her” [2 SAMUEL 13:1, 2].

Amnon loved his half-sister, and his “love” was so intense that he made himself ill because of his fixation about her. He was, as we would say, lovesick. A cousin, Jonadab, a son of David’s brother Shimeah, saw that Amnon was looking quite peaked each morning. Questioning him as to discover the reason for his depression, Amnon confessed that he was in love with Tamar.

Jonadab developed a stratagem that would bring Tamar into his bedroom alone. He advised Amnon to pretend to be sick, so weak that he was unable to leave his bedroom, knowing that the illness would come to the attention of the king. When the king inquired about him, he was to ask that Tamar be sent to prepare some light food in his room. David appears to have been disarmed by the request. After all, this was his son, and Tamar was his daughter. There was nothing untoward in the request, at least superficially. So Tamar was sent to Amnon’s room to prepare some food for him.

When she placed the food next to his couch, he sent all his servants out of the room and asked her to come feed him. In innocence, she approached the bed, at which point he grabbed her, insisting that she submit to his sexual advances. She pleaded with him, begging him not to rape her, “But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her” [2 SAMUEL 13:14].

The story takes a dramatic turn with the fifteenth verse, where we read that after the rape, “Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her” [2 SAMUEL 13:15]. The tragedy is that this is not an uncommon response for those who confuse lust and love when they are “in love.”

Amnon’s actions following his rape of Tamar expose the lie of his love for her. He instructs his servants to expel her from his room despite her pleas for his to accept responsibility for his actions. Moreover, he ordered that the door be locked so that she would no longer bother him with her cries. His disinterest in her welfare betrayed him as being motivated by lust rather than by love. The situation described is not terribly different from much of what parades as love in our modern world.

I don’t believe it is illicit to draw a conclusion from a report of another of David’s sons. In it we read, “Now Adonijah, son of David and Haggith, was promoting himself, boasting, ‘I will be king!’ He managed to acquire chariots and horsemen, as well as fifty men to serve as his royal guard. (Now his father had never corrected him by saying, ‘Why do you do such things?’ He was also very handsome and had been born right after Absalom)”⁴ [1 KINGS 1:5, 6].

⁴ NET Bible

Much as is also true today, David seems not to have disciplined his children, letting them do as they pleased. We have trained our youth in the mechanics of sex, without providing moral standards; and then we marvel that they use the techniques we provided them to gratify their own desires. Youth do not need training in techniques—the designer did an excellent job. Youth do need training in distinguishing right from wrong, and in showing courtesy and consideration toward members of the opposite sex. Our children are not animals incapable of restraint; youth are people created in the image of God who must be trained in what is good and noble.

“They” told us that if we would provide sex education, teen pregnancies would decrease. “They” lied. “They” told us that if we would begin to teach our children the biology of sex at an earlier age, youth would not become promiscuous. “They” lied. “They” told us that if we would not be so “uptight” about sex, people would develop stronger bonds to one another. “They” lied. “They” told us that if we let our children choose how they wanted to live, they would make wise choices. “They” lied. The experts have failed miserably at every point they have pronounced their expertise, and they move farther from accuracy with every pronouncement.

Just so, one undisciplined young man—his hormones dictating his actions toward a young woman—ruined her life, placed himself on a path leading to death, and set the kingdom spinning out of control. His love was revealed to be lust, and the result of unbridled lust is always death. James says, “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” [JAMES 1:14, 15].

AN ANALYSIS OF THE AFTERMATH — I do not claim to be a psychologist, nor do I have any particular desire to engage in psychological speculation about motives and/or rationale. What should engage each of us as Christians is a review of what happened, learning from that study why it happened so that we might be equipped to avoid sinning against God and against our fellow beings with whom we share our lives.

Surrendering to his own desires, Amnon assured the destruction of multiple lives. Unquestionably, he destroyed Tamar’s life. She was raped. There was no love in Amnon’s act, only the gratification for his own lust. Physically, there is no doubt that Tamar was hurt, but the divine text makes it clear that she was devastated emotionally. The conclusion of the text reads, “Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, ‘Get up! Go!’ But she said to him, ‘No, my brother, for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me.’ But he would not listen to her. He called the young man who served him and said, ‘Put this woman out of my presence and bolt the door after her.’ Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves, for thus were the virgin daughters of the king dressed. So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore. And she laid her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went.”

The divine commentary concludes with this heart-rending assessment. “So Tamar lived, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom’s house” [2 SAMUEL 13:15-19, 20b].

What God has caused to be written leads to the conclusion that Tamar never married. She lived out the remainder of her days in her brother Absalom’s house, consumed with grief and bitterness. Amnon did not merely rob this young woman of her innocence and her dignity, he destroyed her soul. From a purely human point of view, he robbed her future and killed her dreams of being a wife and a mother. She would never permit herself to know intimacy, being incapable of trusting any man as result of his despicable act.

She had been treated as though she was a piece of meat. Amnon did not see her as a person with hopes and dreams; he saw only opportunity to possess and use her for his own purposes. It is doubtful that a young man is capable of loving any young woman so long as his focus is on himself. If Christian husbands require the pointed instruction afforded by the Apostle to the Gentiles, how much more does a young man need that same instruction?

Paul wrote, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church” [EPHESIANS 5:25-29]. Husbands must learn to love their wives sacrificially, expending themselves for their wives. Such love does not come naturally to any man. Men must learn to live with their wives in an understanding way, showing honour to them [see 1 PETER 3:7]. Young men, especially, must be taught to treat “older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity” [1 TIMOTHY 5:2].

Amnon undoubtedly thought that all was well. He had gratified his lust, and his father did nothing about his act. The Word of God informs us, “When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry” [2 SAMUEL 13:21]. The Dead Sea Scroll and the Septuagint add, “But he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, since he was his firstborn.” Though he was a man after God’s own heart [see 1 SAMUEL 13:14], David was an indulgent father, as we have already seen. Clearly, he did nothing about Amnon’s disgraceful deed. One can only wonder whether David was paralysed by the knowledge that he had previously surrendered to his own base desires, bringing God’s censure. Perhaps he recognised that God was judging him as He had said he would do. However, because of his failure to hold Amnon accountable for his actions, David ensured continuing heartache for his entire family.

However, all was not well, for as surely as smoke rises from the fire Amnon destroyed his own life when he acted out to gratify his desires. Again, the divine chronicler observes, “Absalom hated Amnon, because he had violated his sister Tamar” [2 SAMUEL 13:22]. For two years, Absalom nursed his rage, and the smouldering embers were fed with a fuel that burned with greater intensity than coal. At last, opportunity presented itself, and Absalom seized the moment. With a precisely staged stratagem, Absalom arranged for his brother to be murdered [see 2 SAMUEL 13:23-30]. I am of the opinion that had he been able, Absalom would have murdered David as well because of his failure to defend Tamar’s honour.

But the destruction arising from Amnon’s dreadful deed is not complete yet. Absalom flees to the land of his grandfather, and remains there for three years. Finally, through deception and intrigue he manages to return to his natal land, but for two more years he is not permitted to see the king. All the while, his anger burns as he plots against his father who had done nothing to protect the honour of his sister. And after two more years, he mounts a rebellion to depose his father from the throne and to seize control of the land. David is able only to barely avoid capture, fleeing for his life, and the land is plunged into civil war.

All this is the result of one young man who was unable to recognise lust for what it was. He mistook lust for love, and when “love” turned to lust, he unleashed awful currents that could only result in death and destruction. Now, death was no longer confined to David’s immediate family, but it intruded into the life of ordinary citizens, dividing families and bringing multiplied people down to the dust. Though you may think there are no consequence for your lusts, “be sure your sin will find you out” [NUMBERS 32:23], and “the wages of sin is death” [ROMANS 6:23].

LESSONS FOR LIFE — Undoubtedly, one can draw multiple conclusions from the account of this dark account. However, seeking to be precise, I draw attention to but a few points that must be made. The lessons are provided to build saints in this most holy faith.

Deeds have consequences. This is a truth that seems to be forgotten in this day. Pirates raid a ship, and when they are killed there are a multitude of apologists who decry that their lives were taken. A youth joins an armed force, and in battle kills a soldier with a grenade. Then, when he is captured and imprisoned, there is a plethora of otherwise intelligent people demanding that he be released because of his youth. Did a young couple's passionate interlude cause her to be pregnant? No worry! We will kill the child and all will be well.

As I read the account God has provided, I cannot help but note the emphasis on the fact that there are consequences for our deeds. Though we live in a world that wants somehow to wave a magic wand to remove consequences, the fact remains that there are consequences for our choices. Amnon assaulted a lovely young woman, acting to satisfy his own desires. Initially, he might have imagined everything was positive. He enjoyed a sense of power, compelling the young woman against her will and silencing any opposition within the palace. He was perhaps on a high as he thought he had gratified his lust. His father the king did nothing.

Likewise, one may appease himself, or herself, acting immorally and there appear to be no consequences. However, there are always consequences to our choices. There are always those who are offended nursing their aggrieved spirits, biding their time until they can do harm. When we act to appease our own desires, we do offend others, and those who are offended will not forget the wrong we have done or the way in which we dismiss their concerns.

If there were no wronged individuals waiting to gain revenge, we would nevertheless know that we have offended against God's holiness. When we were in the world, we might have dismissed such thoughts, imagining that our goodness was enough to please God. Because the lost person is at the centre of his or her universe, they seem always to imagine that God ignores them while holding the rest of the world accountable. However, no Christian should ever stumble into the error of thinking that God ignores sin, and especially that He ignores sin in the life of His child. God loves his child too much to ignore unrighteousness.

The author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians, citing Solomon, writes of discipline, "Have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?"

‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.’”

[HEBREWS 12:5, 6]

God does not ignore sin in His child, nor does He permit sin to reign unchecked forever. Bullies are repaid for their wickedness, and wanton people will at last face His wrath. Dear people, if there is no other lesson to be learned, mark well in your mind that deeds have consequences.

Lust often masquerades as love. Whilst it is vital for youth to hear this truth, adults often forget this same truth. Thus, homes are broken, lives are ruined, families are torn apart, because someone couldn't help himself or herself. Much of modern music seems to build on this theme. "It must be love," the singer wails, "because I can't help myself. The root of this deception lies in the modern emphasis that love is a feeling rather than a choice.

Much of contemporary life, even life within the church, is dictated by emotion. Should an individual not “feel good” about a sermon, it must be wrong. We judge people on how we “feel” about them, and thus their ideas are judged by what we feel about them. Rather than focusing on the logic behind a choice and thinking rationally, we surrender to our feelings. Undoubtedly, this is a major contributor to the dearth of durability in modern marriage and is a major factor in accounting for why commitment is an increasingly rare commodity.

Christians are responsible to exercise their judgement, thinking as they choose to do what is right. If we love someone, we consider what is good for them rather than what is good for ourselves. Perhaps we would do well to read again the spectrum of love as set out by Paul. “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” [1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7].

Love requires time for maturation. Perhaps it is stating the obvious, but youth especially need to hear that love takes time to reach its full flower. Love is so much more than merely erotic. Love consists of growing comfortable with another, of learning to trust one another through every contingency of life, of growing toward one another so that you are able to accept another without feeling the need to change them into someone they are not. There are no shortcuts to this condition. True love begins with the exercise of the will to love another, accepting him or her as he or she is, though willing to seek what is best. Love means learning to respect another as unique, treasuring the person rather than focusing on the exterior features. Love means surrendering your rights for their good.

Listen to that previous passage as presented in a more recent translation:

“Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have.
Love doesn’t strut,
Doesn’t have a swelled head,
Doesn’t force itself on others,
Isn’t always “me first,”
Doesn’t fly off the handle,
Doesn’t keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn’t revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.”⁵

[1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7]

By this criterion, we can judge whether we lust after another or whether we love that one. If we seek their welfare above our own, we love them and honour God. If our own desires prevail over our concern for them, we are in lust! In that case, we need to grow up.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 2002)

What is not said in the text, and what we could wish had occurred, is that Amnon had repented and sought forgiveness. He could not undo the harm he had done, but he might well have assuaged the rage of Absalom. By manfully accepting responsibility for his actions, he might have preserved the kingdom and avoided death for so many others. Perhaps Tamar could have found a measure of relief had Amnon at least confessed that he had wronged her. Had David humbled himself and asked forgiveness of Tamar, Absalom would have forgiven him and there would have been no estrangement between the king and his son.

Solomon spoke a great truth, perhaps recalling the actions of his siblings and his father, when he wrote:

“Pride goes before destruction,
and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

[PROVERBS 16:18]

Do not permit pride to keep you from seeking forgiveness if your lust has driven you to wrong another. Certainly, I would plead with you not to ignore seeking God’s forgiveness. We know, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” [1 JOHN 1:9]. Let us determine that we will live in the light of God’s love, seeking and receiving His forgiveness, and righting whatever wrong we may have done.

None of this matters, if we are outside the precincts of grace. We are under condemnation as lost sinners if we have never received the grace of God and the forgiveness of His Son. We imagine that we can gratify our lusts without worry, just as the world teaches us. However, there is a day of reckoning, and we must give an accounting to God. We can be forgiven, and we can find peace with God through Christ the Lord. The Word of God declares, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That passage concludes by citing the Prophet Joel, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

And that is our prayer for you. Calling on the Name of the Master, receive His gift of life and the forgiveness of sin. Do it today. Do it now. Amen.