

IT WAS THE DAY AFTER their twin sons' eleventh birthday that Ashley and her husband, Nate, came to see me at church. Ashley, with trembling voice, shaking hands, and tears streaming down her face, shared with me that twenty-five years earlier, not long after her eleventh birthday, a relative had begun sexually abusing her.

Those who knew Ashley would have been shocked. She grew up in a churchgoing home, actively served at church as an adult, served as a group leader in the women's ministry, and was always "pleasant."

As Ashley described herself, "Yes, I'm the good girl from the good home. The good mom, the good wife. But nobody knows the ugliness I feel inside me. Nobody knows how I've pretended and denied all these years. And I just can't keep faking it any longer. Inside, I'm a mess. Depressed to the point that at times I've thought of suicide. Always fearful and anxious—terrified I'll displease someone. Terrified someone will find out what an empty but evil thing I am . . ."

As Ashley's voice trailed off, Nate asked, "Pastor Bob, can you help? Does the Bible offer any hope for my wife?"

GRACE FOR OUR DISGRACE

Nate's questions are likely your questions. "Can the church help those who have been sexually abused? Does Christianity, the gospel, God's Word, offer hope for those who have experienced the horrors of sexual abuse?" You may ask because you're a "people helper." You may ask because someone you love has been abused and you feel helpless. You may ask because you're a sexual abuse "survivor," but you don't feel like you're surviving much at all.

Nate's questions are fair questions, especially since the church seems to be in as much denial as some abuse victims. Recently, while speaking before a group of more than one hundred pastors, I asked how many had preached on sexual, physical, or emotional abuse in the past five years. Not one hand went up. I asked how many had received any training in Bible college or seminary to assist them in ministering to sexual abuse victims. Again, not a single hand shot up. I asked how many had ever preached on 2 Samuel 13 or any of the "texts of terror" passages (especially those in Genesis that address the abuse of women). Only four men had ever done so, and all four acknowledged that they never related the message to the issue of sexual abuse. Many of the pastors even admitted that when preaching through Genesis or 2 Samuel, they purposefully skipped the texts of terror passages.

Sexual abuse ravages the soul. It causes unimaginable distress, damage, and disgrace. It is faced honestly and openly in the Bible. Yet we either mistreat it or ignore it. This is to our shame. It is time for a change.

In this booklet we want to learn how to face sexual abuse face-to-face with Christ. We want to understand how the Evil One attempts to use sexual abuse to destroy faith, hope, peace, and love. We want to obtain wise counsel from the Divine Counselor through his Word, which teaches us that *grace is God's prescription for the disgrace of sexual abuse*. Specifically, we want to journey together on God's pathway from *loss of trust* to *faith*, from *powerlessness* to *hope*, from *shame* to *shalom and peace*, and from *being used and feeling useless* to *love*.

Before we begin, I want to share a personal word to those who have been sexually abused. I know you wonder if the shattered pieces of your life can be reassembled. I know you long for compassionate wisdom for moving from victim to victor in Christ. In what you're about to read, I want to walk

with you through 2 Samuel 13 on a journey with Tamar—a woman who endured sexual abuse at the hands of her half-brother. With Tamar we will learn how to apply gospel truth to our lives so we can experience four living examples of the truth that states that where sin abounds, grace superabounds. Together, we'll experience (1) sustaining faith that preserves trust in the midst of doubt, (2) healing hope that clings to the goodness of God in the midst of the badness of life, (3) reconciling peace that receives Christ's grace in the midst of our disgrace, and (4) guiding love that offers beauty in the midst of ashes.

GOD'S CENTRAL MESSAGE TO YOU

While we'll focus primarily on one passage (2 Sam. 13), we need to place that passage within the larger framework of the overriding purpose of the Bible. Let's frame it together by considering God's central message to you.

God's Mission Statement

Today we hear all about “mission statements.” Businesses have them, churches develop them, even families and individuals craft mission statements. What is God's mission statement? What is the central message that God wants to communicate to you as you read his Word?

I'm sure we could each craft unique responses to that question. Here's my three-word summary of God's mission statement:

“I Am Indispensable.”

Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:8–9 communicate this message. “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt

the sentence of death. But this happened *that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*"

In Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching*, he urges us to find the FCF—Fallen Condition Focus—in every passage.¹ All of Scripture encourages us to shout, like the elderly woman in those old commercials, "Help! I've fallen and I can't get up!" The consistent message of every biblical text is that *we desperately need God*. The Bible is the most honest, realistic, earthy book ever written. God's Word is not an advertisement for a trouble-free life. Instead, it advertises our need for God's grace because of our continual struggle with suffering and sin.

God says to us, "You are hopeless and helpless without my grace. I offer it to you in my Son. You cannot survive your suffering or overcome your sin apart from my grace. I am indispensable."

The Central Message of Life and of Ministry

As we attempt to minister to one another, we can translate this central message of the Bible into a statement about the central message of life lived in a fallen world.

One-another ministry is defective unless we apply Christ's grace to deal both with the evils we have suffered and with the sins we have committed.

We are *coram Deo* beings. That is, God designed us to live face-to-face in his presence. We are also *sola gratia* beings—God designed us to live by grace alone. Therefore, the essence of our life together is to encourage one another to live face-to-face with God through grace as we face suffering and fight against sin. We want to create in one another a greater awareness of God so that Christ and his grace permeate how we live each

1. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2005).

day. Here's how I summarize it when I'm teaching on biblical counseling and spiritual friendship:

Dealing with Suffering: God Is Good Even When Life Is Bad

Dealing with Sinning: God Is Gracious Even When I Am Sinful

The Central Message of 2 Samuel 9 to 1 Kings 2

God's indispensability is exactly the message of the life of David, especially from 2 Samuel 9 to 1 Kings 2. Here we have David, a man after God's own heart. David, God's chosen servant. David, the recipient of God's covenant promises. David, the man whose life is a *mess—filled with sin and suffering*. In this section of Scripture, David commits adultery, lies, murders, does nothing when his son rapes his daughter, and is ousted from the throne of Israel by another son. If any section of the Bible was written to show us that *we need God*, this is it. The entire Davidic narrative points us to our ultimate need for the Greater David—for Jesus Christ.

This narrative points us to our need for our gracious and faithful God. David and his family suffer tragedy after tragedy, and through it all God remains eternally faithful to his promises. David and his family sin time after time, and God forgives time after time. God will not cast off David, nor will he cast off you or me. The message of the Bible, the message of life and ministry, the message of 2 Samuel 9 to 1 Kings 2, and the message of 2 Samuel 13 are all the same—*grace is God's prescription for our disgrace*. Grace is God's medicine of choice for our suffering and sin.

UNDERSTANDING THE DAMAGE DONE BY SEXUAL ABUSE: 2 SAMUEL 13

In looking to 2 Samuel 13, I am *not* implying that this one passage has all the wisdom we need to address this complex

and painful issue. Perhaps a little personal history will help to place this passage into perspective. When I teach a semester-long seminary class on sexual abuse recovery, I start by telling my students that “God dragged me kicking and screaming into a focus on sexual abuse counseling.” By that, I do not imply a lack of compassion for those who have been sexually abused. I’m stating the opposite. I feel deeply for those who have been sexually abused. So deeply that, especially at first, counseling abuse victims was overwhelming for me.

I vividly remember the first sexual abuse survivor I worked with—Tim. Initially, I felt clueless to help Tim. He educated me as much as I counseled him—helping me to understand the damage done by and the dynamics related to sexual abuse. In seeking to minister to Tim, I turned to another source—the Bible—examining it literally cover to cover to see what it teaches about sexual abuse and sexual abuse recovery. Through that process I’ve come to see that God’s Word provides us with robust, relevant, relational wisdom for addressing the horrors of sexual abuse.

Tamar’s narrative in 2 Samuel 13 is part of that larger biblical portrait of sexual abuse and sexual abuse recovery. It remarkably represents themes woven throughout the rest of Scripture’s teaching on sexual abuse—the damage done and the path to God’s healing hope.

Why Examine the Damage Done?

During my three decades of ministry as a biblical counselor, I’ve become convinced that we need to develop a biblical “sufferology”—a biblical theology of and perspective on suffering and healing. The Bible is brimming with it. We can hardly open a single page and not see God addressing suffering.² If we are to be truly biblical

2. For my development of a biblical model of “sufferology,” see Robert Kellemen, *God’s Healing for Life’s Losses: How to Find Hope for the Hurting* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2010).

counselors and one-another ministers, then we must examine the damage done to the souls of those who have suffered sexual abuse.

We also need a clear picture of the prime strategy of the Evil One. The Prince of Darkness is our most radical enemy. It is his strategy to use the horrors of sexual abuse to attempt to destroy that which enables us to be most human: faith, hope, peace, and love. To win the battle in Christ, through Christ, and by Christ, we must first name the damage that has been done to us as bearers of the image of God.

OUR JOURNEY IN: COMPASS POINTS OF THE SOUL

God has not left us clueless. Throughout the Bible, including in 2 Samuel 13, God lays before us what we need to know to grasp the primary damage of sexual abuse. The Bible teaches us that sexual abuse is ultimately spiritual abuse—it attacks us body *and* soul.

In Tamar’s life we see this damage, this attempted destruction, in four primary ways. As we explore Tamar’s narrative, we’ll use the language of a “journey.” This allows her story to show us four road map markers, four compass points, on the *journey into the soul* of a person who has been sexually abused. This helps us to avoid the idea of “stages” or “phases,” which might mistakenly cause us to think that there exists some common, linear, nice and neat process. There’s nothing nice or neat about sexual abuse! It is evil and complex, awful and hideous. Each situation is different, and each victim of abuse is a unique image bearer. Yet we can detect some themes that occur across Scripture and across the lives and souls of those who have been abused. We will consider four such themes from 2 Samuel 13.

Journey One: The Damage of Loss of Trust—The Attempted Destruction of Faith (2 Sam. 13:1–12)

Amnon is King David’s firstborn, the heir apparent to the throne. He also happens to be the stepbrother of the beautiful

Tamar. And he happens to be in love with her, or so he says—God labels Amnon’s feelings incestuous lust. His unbridled lusts and his unfulfilled longings are eating him alive until his shrewd friend, Jonadab, schemes up a plan to get Amnon alone with Tamar.

Pretending to be ill, Amnon tells Daddy, King David, that he would like to have his sister Tamar bring him some food. David becomes the unwitting go-between, sending his daughter into the lion’s den with his son. Innocently, naively, and lovingly, Tamar prepares a feast fit for a king-to-be. Amnon, according to plan, refuses to eat and sends everyone out of the room.

We pick up the story at 2 Samuel 13:10–12.

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. But when she took it to him to eat, he grabbed her and said, “Come to bed with me, my sister.”

“Don’t, my brother!” she said to him.

Here we witness the damage of loss of trust. Did you catch the phrases “my sister” and “my brother”? In fact, the inspired narrator repeatedly emphasizes that *this is family!* Twenty times in the Hebrew of 13:1–22 we read of family ties: son of, sister of, your brother, your father. The very person who should protect and cherish Tamar violates her instead. Amnon uses Tamar’s untainted trust as a doorway to gain access to her body and soul. She opens her heart to her father and brother only to have it betrayed and crushed.

Satan is shrewd. He knows that God built us to trust him. He also knows that because of the fall, our inclination is to trust ourselves or anyone and anything but God. So Satan loves to feed our distrust of God with *betrayal by those who ought to be trustworthy*. He wants faith to look foolish.

Can you picture it? God is wooing us back to himself, drawing us home to his holy and loving heart, to Christ our faithful Savior. All the while Satan is whispering, “You can’t trust him. You can’t trust anyone. You can’t even trust *family!* Don’t be foolish. Trust only yourself!” Evil wins the battle for our soul to the extent that we experience trust in others and in God as dangerous and foolish.

Sexual abuse, especially incestuous sexual abuse—abuse by a relative—shrinks the heart, shrivels the soul. Ashley’s description depicts this powerfully. “I responded to my abuse by erecting a wall around my heart so that I could close the door of trust to God and others. I picture myself slamming the door shut, double-bolting it, bracing my shoulder against it, and trying with all my might to keep God and everybody else out.” She concluded that it was unsafe to open her soul to anyone . . . including God.

In this, Ashley is much like Tamar. In 13:13 she speaks of her “disgrace,” and in 13:20 the text describes her as “desolate.” (We’ll examine both words in more detail later.) Both Hebrew words speak of *relational struggle*: alienation from God, separation from others, and dis-integration from self. Sexual abuse is *relational* abuse that seeks to sever our capacity for mutual connection.

Journey Two: The Damage of Powerlessness—The Attempted Destruction of Hope (2 Sam. 13:2, 11–14)

Satan attempts to destroy faith by the damage of loss of trust, and he attempts to destroy hope by the damage of loss of power. The narrator informs us that the male, Amnon, begins powerless—he’s frustrated because it seems impossible for him to get what he wants. The female, Tamar, begins pure, at peace, and protected—she is the beautiful virgin daughter of the king.

And then the shift occurs. Tamar endures the titanic sinking of everything she had ever known and hoped for.

We read in 13:11 that Amnon “grabbed her.” The Hebrew word pictures laying hold of, seizing, clutching. The author is informing us that this was a violent act of rape. This was a ruthless exercise of power by a man playing God with a woman’s life.

Fighting against Amnon, Tamar cries out in 13:12, “Don’t force me.” She attempts to retain her voice and reclaim her power. In the Hebrew, Tamar speaks one powerful vocative word: “No!” She then confronts her attacker. “You would be like one of the wicked fools in Israel” (13:13).

Ignoring her and thinking only of his lusts, Amnon leaves Tamar voiceless and powerless. “But he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her” (13:14). He forces himself upon her. “Force” (13:12) means to oppress, humiliate, violate, and abuse. The Old Testament uses the word several times for forced intercourse, violent intrusion—rape. It pictures the victim so intimidated that she cowers in a corner. This is a cruel act of a powerful person overpowering the weak.

Ashley described her sense of powerlessness, helplessness, and hopelessness. “While people think I’m oh-so-pleasant, kind, sweet, and nice, the truth is that I live by the motto: ‘Why bother? Why want? Why care?’ I feel better when I feel numb. I look nice because I never exert myself because it’s just not worth it. It only hurts to hope, hurts to dream.”

Ashley told me about going to see the musical *Les Misérables* with Nate. The character she identified with the most was Fantine and the death of hope Fantine’s soul endured. Abandoned by the father of her child and now near death, Fantine looks back on life with regret and looks ahead with hopelessness. She is a picture of what happens when we lose sight of God in the midst of life’s losses and abuses.

Ashley related to her own life the despairing words of Fantine’s song, “I Dreamed a Dream”: “Like Fantine, once I was young and dreamed grand dreams, but my dreams were dashed

and my hope torn to shreds. Like her, my dreams have died and I don't have the strength to weather the storms of life anymore. All my dreams have turned to shame."

These are words that Satan loves to hear. They are the words often on the lips of the sexual abuse victim. "Now life has killed the dream I dreamed."³ These are the words of a Christian who has lost sight of Christ. The sexual abuse victim who despairs of hope does not cry out with the psalmist, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help" (Ps. 121:1 KJV). The despairing sexual abuse victim refuses to believe that help will ever come for a powerless and voiceless person like herself. As Ashley put it, "Life is empty today, and it will never change, only get worse."

Journey Three: The Damage of Shame—The Attempted Destruction of Peace/Shalom (2 Sam. 13:13–17)

The end result of the loss of faith and hope is shame. Tamar verbalizes her shame in 13:13. "What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace?" Do you hear the desperation in her voice? She feels surrounded by disgrace. Wherever she goes she feels as if all eyes are on her—that everyone knows. And she feels as if there is no place of grace that can remedy her disgrace.

The Hebrew language maintains a twofold use of the word *disgrace*, and both fit the context of sexual abuse. The first use means to feel contempt for oneself, to feel reproach, to feel guilty and filthy. Many sexual abuse victims feel a tremendous amount of false guilt that leads to a sense of worthlessness and soul ugliness.

One way that Ashley conveyed her sense of ugliness and shame was by her inability to make eye contact. She referenced another scene in *Les Misérables*—the opening scene where the convict Jean Valjean and other prisoners are working like slaves.

3. Herbert Kretzmer, "I Dreamed a Dream," *Les Misérables* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1987).

Treated as subhuman, they're singing, "Look down, look down! Don't look 'em in the eye."⁴

Ashley explained. "That's how I feel—so ashamed. I'm convinced that people's eyes can pierce right into my soul and see the pit of evil that I and everyone else want to reject. And though I know it's not true, some days I even wonder if Jesus cares." Instead of being an open recipient of grace, Ashley felt like a black hole of disgrace.

A sexual abuser like Amnon takes delight when his victim feels guilty. This coincides with the second Hebrew use of this word "disgrace"—casting blame on and imputing guilt to another person. We see this clearly in 13:17. "He called his personal servant and said, 'Get this woman out of here and bolt the door after her.'" By putting her out and sending her away, Amnon shouts the message that she had shamefully approached him and that she was guilty of disgraceful conduct and attempted seduction. He bolts the door as if her femininity is dangerous. Amnon's actions are clearly designed to paint Tamar as a filthy harlot.

It is chillingly like the modern-day horror stories of the abuser who attempts to silence his victim with lies like, "Your parents won't want you if they find out what *you* did." "Your mom would stop loving you and give you up for adoption." "The police would arrest *you* for this."

The combined impact of self-contempt and imputed shame partially explains some of the symptoms that Ashley was experiencing. She struggled with chronic low-grade depression and joylessness, which at times turned into full-blown depression and suicidal ideations. She reported that she never enjoyed sex and, in fact, never enjoyed any pleasures. While others saw her as so "together," she often secretly felt like she was "coming unglued, falling apart, near a breakdown." While others appreciated her

4. Kretzmer, "Work Song," *Les Misérables*.

kind spirit, she would say, “I don’t even know this person they’re describing. I’m a stranger to myself.” And “‘Kindness’? That’s just because I’m terrified of anyone ever rejecting me. I’m the stereotypical perfectionistic people-pleaser.”

All of these symptoms reflect the opposite of peace, of biblical shalom. Shalom is much more than the absence of enmity or the cessation of warfare. Shalom is the active, calming presence of harmony—relational harmony. Shalom with God conquers alienation and involves reconciliation and the confidence that through Christ we are accepted in the beloved. Shalom with others conquers separation and involves connection and the confidence that mutual sacrificial love is possible and desirable. Shalom with self conquers dis-integration and involves integration and confidence regarding our identity in Christ and a sense of personal wholeness.

Journey Four: The Damage of Being Used and Feeling Useless—The Attempted Destruction of Love (2 Sam. 13:14–20)

Satan heaps damage on top of damage. In 2 Samuel 13:14, the inspired narrator exposes the damage of being used and feeling useless—the attempted destruction of love. “He raped her.” The Hebrew is brutal. It pictures her lifeless, stiff as a board, frozen like a statue, and left for dead.

Amnon used her and then rejected her. “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!’” (13:15). Tamar was used and then abused. She was first regarded, then discarded. Amnon knew nothing about true love. Amnon the rapist, the sexual abuser, is filled with selfishness, acting in unprincipled, self-indulgent self-interest. What Amnon experienced was lust, not love. He gratified his animal passions and then humiliated her further by casting her off like a filthy rag.⁵

5. See C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume II—Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I & II Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 399.

He dehumanizes her. Our modern translations are too polite. “Get this woman out of here and bolt the door after her.” The word “woman” is not in the Hebrew. It is literally, “Get *this* out of here.” Tamar went from being the king’s daughter and the king-to-be’s sister to being a *thing*. “Get *this thing* out of here!” She is nameless—nothing more than an object; that is, disposable trash.

In so doing, Amnon condemns Tamar to a life sentence of desolation. And she realizes it. Her symbolic actions in 13:18–19 portray how she felt that every shred of dignity had been ripped away. “So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. She was wearing a richly ornamented robe, for this was the kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore. Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornamented robe she was wearing.”

No one else looks upon her with love and respect, but the inspired narrator forces us to look at Tamar. God sees. And Tamar sees—she sees her clothes that had proclaimed her royalty and her purity. And she shreds them as Amnon had shredded her.

Matthew Henry insightfully explains that in shedding her virginal clothes, Tamar expresses her loathing for her own beauty and femininity because they had occasioned Amnon’s unlawful lust.⁶ Sexual abuse is not only physical abuse; it is not only spiritual abuse; it is not only relational abuse; it is also *gender* abuse. God created us as female image bearers or male image bearers. We are female or male not only in our bodies, but also in the essence of our souls, our selves, our personhood. Sexual abuse abuses a female soul and body or a male soul and body.

The results are clear and formidable. Tamar lays aside her royal ornaments and retires into a lonely and private existence ever after. Her lot in life is not “happy ever after,”

6. Matthew Henry, *The Matthew Henry Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 344.

but “lonely and loveless ever after.” “And Tamar lived in her brother Absalom’s house, a desolate woman” (13:20). As Matthew Henry summarizes, “She lived in solitude and sorrow.”⁷ Evil’s most scurrilous work is in destroying our passion to love. Evil destroys love by causing us to feel ashamed of our desire to be loved and to love.

As Ashley, Nate, and I discussed Tamar’s story together, Ashley explained, “I can so relate to Tamar. She’s tearing her robes in grief and lament because her heart has been torn. It’s like she’s saying, ‘I’m ruined for love—loveless and worthless. I’m no longer a loved, worthy child of the King. I’m taking off the King’s garments. I’m now useless for the kingdom. Oh, I’ll make it to heaven, but I’ll have nothing to offer my King because my soul has nothing to offer anyone.’ I know it’s a lie, but I find myself believing it nonetheless.”

Our adversary, the Devil, uses sexual abuse to put a chokehold on our redeemed spirit. I imagine him saying, “All right, God, if heaven is yours, then I want the earth. And if the earth is yours, then I want to ruin it. And if you promise to keep their souls forever, then I want to pummel their spirits.” The Christian who has been sexually abused, and who succumbs to Satan’s lies, feels used and useless—unable to love and be loved.

PAINTING PORTRAITS OF THE DAMAGE DONE

Putting it all together, we can suggest four summary pictures that help to frame (but certainly not to understand fully) some of the horrific damage done by sexual abuse.

1. The Loss of *Faith*: The Door of the Heart Bolted Shut
2. The Loss of *Hope*: The Death of Dreams—“Life Has Killed the Dream I Dreamed”

7. Ibid.