

19. God behind the scenes

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[0 : 00] Now we come to our Bible reading, which is on page 264. We're continuing our studies in David. Two weeks ago we looked at the episode in chapters 11 and 12 where David sinned greatly against the Lord.

David was forgiven, but the prophet Nathan, who spoke to him, said that in chapter 12 that judgment, chapter 12, verses 11 and 12, I will raise up evil to you against you from your own house. And this chapter and the chapters that follow are beginning to work out that prophecy of Nathan. So let's read the chapter. It's quite a long one, but we'll read it all.

2 Samuel chapter 13, verse 1. Now 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.

[1 : 18] But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimea, David's brother. And Jonadab was a very crafty man. And he said to Amnon, 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.

Then 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, that he refused to eat.

[2 : 32] 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, no, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel. Do not do this outrageous thing. And as for me, where could I carry my shame?

And as for you, you 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 Amnon would not listen to her. Being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her. Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred.

[3 : 27] So the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. Amnon said to her, get up, go. 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.

And her brother Epsilon said to her, has Amnon your brother been with you? Now hold your peace, my sister. He is your brother. Do not take this to heart. So Tamar lived a desolate woman in her brother Epsilon's house.

When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry. But Epsilon spoke to Amnon, neither good nor bad. For Epsilon hated Amnon because he had violated his sister Tamar.

[4 : 43] After two full years, Epsilon had sheep shearers at Baal-Hatzor, which is near Ephraim. And Epsilon invited all the king's sons.

And Epsilon came to the king and said, behold, your servant has sheep shearers. Please let the king and his servants go with your servant. The king said to Epsilon, no, my son, let us not all go, lest we be burdensome to you.

He pressed him, but he would not go, but gave him his blessing. And Epsilon said, if not, please let my brother Amnon go with us. And the king said to him, why should he go with you?

But Epsilon pressed him and he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him. And Epsilon commanded his servants, mark when Amnon's heart is merry with wine.

And when I say to you, strike Amnon, then kill him. Do not fear, have I not commanded you? Be courageous and be valiant. So the servants of Epsilon did to Amnon as Epsilon had commanded.

[5 : 47] Then all the king's sons arose and each mounted his mule and fled. While they were on their way, news came to David. Epsilon struck down all the king's sons and not one of them is left.

Then the king arose and tore his garments and lay on the earth. And all his servants who were standing by tore their garments. But Jonadab, the son of Shimei, a David's brother, said, Let them, my lord, suppose that they have killed all the young men, the king's sons.

For Amnon alone is dead. For by the command of Epsilon this has been determined from the day he violated his sister Tamar. Now therefore, let not my lord, the king, so take it to heart as to suppose that all the king's sons are dead.

For Amnon alone is dead. But Epsilon fled. And the young man who kept the watch lifted up his eyes and looked. And behold, many people were coming from the road behind him by the side of the mountain.

And Jonadab said to the king, Behold, the king's sons have come. As your servant said, so it has come about. And as soon as he finished speaking, behold, the king's sons came and lifted up their voice and wept.

[7 : 01] And the king also and all his servants wept very bitterly. But Epsilon fled and went to Talmi, the son of Amahud, king of Geshur.

And David mourned for his son day after day. So Epsilon fled and went to Geshur and was there three days. And the spirit of the king longed to go out to Epsilon because he was comforted about Amnon since he was dead.

This is the word of the Lord. Now, could we have our Bibles open, please, at page 264. And before we look together at this passage, we'll ask the Lord's help.

Let's pray. God our Father, your word speaks to us often in ways that are strange and almost alien. But we believe that this is your word given to us. And so I pray now that you will take my human words in all their weakness, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word.

[8 : 09] And so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen. Amen. So, 2 Samuel 13.

There is no such thing as a no-go area in the Bible. Every part of the Bible is preachable.

I say that regularly at Corn Hill, but I must confess that my heart filled me when I came to 2 Samuel chapter 13. Like Hamlet, the native few of resolution was sickly door with a pale cast of thought.

I thought, shall I jump the chapter? Now, there's nothing wrong, of course, if you're doing a series in a long book to miss out the occasional chapter, if it's simply, if it's the same kind of material, and you feel you've already covered it.

And the trouble is here, you'd have to jump to about chapter 21. Before you find a chapter which you think is more profitable. Now, I remembered Romans 15, verse 4.

[9 : 21] Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

I read that verse again. Now, I found it didn't save whatever was written in former days except for 2 Samuel 13. And a few other nasty chapters in the Old Testament, not to mention the entire book of

Revelation, was written for our learning.

My original title for this sermon was A Dysfunctional Family. I decided against that for two reasons. First of all, if you hear the title, A Dysfunctional Family, it's awfully easy for, oh, my family's not dysfunctional, so I'll go to sleep and I'll waken up for the last hymn.

And the second thing is that this is God's story. This is not the story of Amnon and Tamar and Absalom. This is God's story.

Without the grace of God, all families are dysfunctional families. That includes the church family.

[10:33] Simply because you give the title family to a group of people doesn't mean that love and grace and peace and joy and happiness will flow automatically by osmosis.

So my title is God Behind the Scenes. God Behind the Scenes is working to bring about his kingdom. As I said two weeks ago, we looked at 2 Samuel 11 and 12.

These stories must be read in the light of Genesis 3.15, the ongoing battle between the serpent who is trying to destroy the kingdom, trying to prevent it coming, and the serpent crusher who is still to come.

Satan is having a good go here, isn't he? The chapter is a mess. Lust, rape, cheating, murder, painful inactivity of David. Reads like the tabloid press, in fact.

Just imagine the headlines of the tabloid press have been active in this time. You see there's a huge difference, isn't there? The tabloid press doesn't believe in grace.

[11:37] The tabloid press doesn't believe in forgiveness. But God is working behind the scenes. His judgments, the judgments of chapter 12, verses 11 and 12, are working out judgment and the possibility of grace.

That's what we're going to look at. The chapter is a powerful, powerful warning, and more so for being a story. Remember how Nathan brought David to his senses by telling him a story, the story of the rich man who stole the lamb from the poor man.

Here's another story. And my two main points follow the two main parts of the chapter. I'm going to add a third point as a kind of footnote to help us to see this and the following chapters in perspective.

Well, let's look at the first part of the chapter, verses 1 to 21. These verses are telling us that sin perverts our humanity.

Interesting, the first name mentioned in the story is Absalom. He is going to be a prominent actor in the next few scenes, and he's almost going to cost David, his father, his throne.

[12:56] Sin perverts our humanity. Now let's look at that a bit more closely. Humanity is made in the image of God, to glorify him, to enjoy him forever.

And humanity is made for relationship, the covenant love of a man and a woman, and that kind of love that flows through all God's family.

So the first way in which sin perverts our humanity is sin turns us in on ourselves. It's how Luther describes sin, when we are turned in upon ourselves, and we become the center of the universe.

Me, me, me. My desires, my ambitions, my job, my family, my church, everything relating to me. True humanity glorifies God. Humanity that turns away from God turns into self-love. Now Amnon, Amnon David's son, is the crown prince.

[14:02] He's the firstborn son of David, and here he is utterly disqualifying himself from the kingship. This is one of the things that this story is telling us.

I'll come back to that later. It's a brilliantly told story. In verses 7 and following, so Tamar, verse 8, so Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house who was lying down.

She took dough and kneaded it and made cakes in his side and baked the cakes. She took the pan and emptied it out before him, but he refused to eat. In other words, we see Tamar through Amnon's eyes.

This is passion without love. There are dark suggestions as well of incest because Tamar was not his full sister but was his half-sister.

So the first way in which sin perverts our humanity, sin turns us in on ourselves. We worship ourselves. My desires must be gratified.

[15:01] Never mind about anyone else. Never mind about the harm, the damage, the discord I'll cause. I want my own way. Secondly, sin does the devil's work.

Look at verse 3. But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimea, David's brother. And Jonadab was a very crafty man.

This word crafty, who is the first person in Scripture to be called crafty or subtle? Now the serpent, Genesis 3 tells us, was more subtle.

It's not the same word, but it's the same idea. This is the wisdom. The letter of James says, comes from below. The wisdom which is earthly, which is demonic.

The kind of wisdom without godliness, which is used to manipulate. You see, Jonadab is by far the most dangerous man in the story. Amnon simply thinks for these hormones.

[16:08] Jonadab is a subtle, scheming man who is determined that he is going to, determined he is going to get his own way and to manipulate.

That's what sin does. Sin does the devil's work. Now, remember, that sin is our own responsibility. But whenever we sin, the devil is there to exploit it.

Illustration I've heard used, which I find helpful, is, imagine you are sitting on a summer's afternoon in the garden enjoying a cold drink. You have a cut on your arm.

And that cut is painful, and then on it lands a wasp. Now, the wasp didn't cause the cut, but the wasp will certainly make it far worse.

Now, the cut on your arm, if you like, is your own sin, whereas the wasp landing on it is the devil. The devil is always there to exploit sin. Sin does the devil's work.

[17:09] What's the third thing that sin does? Sin creates victims. You see, much of the talk today is about sexual license, along the lines that it creates freedom.

Along the lines that it liberates people. Along the lines that it makes people more human. But sin does create victims.

And it's usually women, but it's sexual sin like this. Think of these, think of these poor girls from Eastern Europe who are lured here by promises of employment.

Lured here by promises of a better life. And they end up shamelessly exploited by the rich men who lure them here. This is what's happening here as well.

Notice David's gullibility verse. We'll come back to David's gullibility. The king came to him, Amnon said to the king, David seems to be completely clueless about what's happening here.

[18:08] And then, as I say, we see Tamar through Amnon's eyes as he watches her cooking for him. How does Amnon treat Tamar?

He treats her as an object. Verse 14. He would not listen to her and being stronger than she, he violated her.

That is how sin behaves. Sin is a bully. And even worse, verse 17, he called the young man who served him and said, put this woman out of my presence. vault the door after her.

The word woman is not in the Hebrew text. Put this, this piece of rubbish out of my presence. I finished with her. A piece of rubbish to be dumped. That is what sin does to people who allow it to dominate them.

Sin creates victims. Sin does not liberate sin and slaves. Sin does not make people more human. Sin makes people more like animals.

[19:10] So we've got the animal lust of Amnon and the satanic wisdom of Jonadab together creating Tamar as a victim.

And Tamar's bleak future, verse 19, Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore and laid her hand on her head and went away crying aloud as she went.

Her future is bleak. she's been dumped by the crown prince. Sin creates victims. The other thing sin does is sin disables.

Verse 21. When King David heard all these things, he was very angry. David's fruitless and ineffective anger.

Now you can understand, of course, David had become a prisoner of his own folly with Bathsheba. He was surrounded by a hard man like Joab who would never forget and never forgive.

[20:15] But that doesn't take away David's responsibility. David was shepherd of his people. David was the fount of justice in the land. And as king, it was his duty to punish the guilty and to protect the innocent.

So you see how sin turns us in on ourselves. It makes us totally self-centered. It does the devil's work. It creates victims and it disables.

And of course, you think, what a dreadful story. Let's avoid the temptation to say, of course, it's not us. Listen to these words from 1 Corinthians chapter 6.

I'm not asking you to look at them, but listen to them. What Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6 verse 9, Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?

Do not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who practice homosexuality nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor revilers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

[21 : 27] Was that meant to make the Corinthians and us sit back and say, good, that doesn't apply to us. Listen to the next words and such are some of you.

Sin destroys and perverts our humanity. Let's go on now to the second part of the chapter which is verses 23 to 39 where we move from the realm of sex to the realm of politics and the title I would give that is Sin Produces Hatred.

This is a foretaste of what's going to happen in the next chapters in the political arena. And the focus here is on Absalom who is going to emerge of course even more prominently in the next chapters.

And first of all in verses 20, 23 and following we have Absalom's cool and patient hatred. Absalom's not the kind of guy who flies off the handle and five minutes later is regretting what he did.

Absalom's hatred simmers and simmers and simmers. Now of course he had every right to be angry. That's not what was wrong because Amnon had violated his sister Tamar.

[22 : 50] Absalom was absolutely right to be angry. But the problem is this was hatred without any kind of restraint, without any possibility of putting right what was wrong.

You see, there was no question of ever any kind of reconciliation or forgiveness. First of all because Amnon probably didn't think he needed any forgiveness or reconciliation and Absalom wouldn't have done it anyway.

Someone once said to John Wesley, Wesley, I never forgive. Wesley replied, well I hope you never sin. That's so penetrating isn't it?

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Now that doesn't mean that God is saying if you jolly well don't forgive other people's sins, I'm not going to forgive you.

What is being said is if we keep on an unforgiving, ungenerous, judgmental nature, we will get to the stage where we're incapable of receiving forgiveness.

[23 : 59] That is the point. Hatred twists, hatred perverts. sin produces hatred. And you'll notice another thing here, the dangerous vacuum left by David's failure to enforce justice.

David ought to have punished Amnon. Because he didn't, there's a dangerous vacuum left, which is, as I've said, we can understand David's failure to act, but we can't really excuse it.

And because of it, Absalom moves into this and behaves essentially like a hard man with a mob.

Absalom, and you can imagine this is the beginning of his coming to power.

Oh, Absalom's a strong man. Absalom will put things right. You can just imagine, you can see how already Absalom is building up himself to take over the throne.

And there is an atmosphere of terror created. As I said already, sin does not liberate. Sin in prisons. Similarly here, hatred does not liberate.

[25 : 11] Hatred creates an atmosphere of terror. This is the cunning plan in verses 23 and following. He invites David, Absalom invites David to a sheep-shearing feast, probably knowing his father would decline, and then persuades David to let Amnon come.

And of course, in this atmosphere of suspicion, panic takes over. Verse 30, Absalom has struck down all the king's sons, and not one of them is left.

Now that is how hatred and terror work. Create an atmosphere in which everyone is afraid. Create an atmosphere in which no one feels safe.

sin is dead. And in any case, Amnon is dead, and for Absalom, that's all that matters. So you see, sin produces hatred.

Sin does not unite communities. Sin does not build up friendships. Sin creates hatred, suspicion, and an atmosphere, and a total atmosphere of terror.

[26 : 20] And of course, once again, it would be very, very easy to think of Absalom as a one-off. Listen once again to the New Testament, this time from Titus, chapter 3, verse 3.

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others, and hating one another.

Sin does, isn't it? You see, we may not have carried out Absalom's sins, but we certainly share Absalom's nature. Even if we don't do what he did, all the sinful passions are in us, only to be

restrained by grace.

This is the reign of sin and death, is it not? Remember the big story, once again, the kingdom of God is coming, but the sin and death are reigning.

So you see these two main sections of the chapter, sin perverts our humanity, makes us subhuman, and sin makes us hate. Sin produces hatred.

[27 : 38] God has provided a savior.

Sin perverts our humanity. Sin produces hatred, but God has provided a savior. And I want to say just a word or two about where we find that in this chapter.

There are many parts of the Bible. The whole book of Esther, God's name is not mentioned. He's not mentioned in the Song of Songs either. Where is he? I want to say two things.

We must look at the big picture. First of all, where this story comes. this is sandwiched between chapter 7 and chapter 23.

Now in chapter 7, which we looked at some weeks ago, I want to read you some words. You don't need to turn it up, but this is in chapter 7. This is what the Lord says through Nathan to David.

[28 : 49] He shall build a house for my name, that's talking about Solomon, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.

When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rods of men, with the stripes of the sons of men. That's what's happening here, the discipline and the judgment. Listen to the next bit.

But my steadfast love, my heseth, this great biblical word, will not depart from him as I took it from Saul.

God's steadfast love is still at work in the background. Then again, 2 Samuel 23, David says, he has made with me an everlasting covenant.

So, fitting it into the big picture, but then you might well ask, but where is it in this chapter? Where are the signs that God is working? Now, there's a little detail in this chapter, which is very easy to ignore, and I certainly ignored it when I started working on this chapter.

[30 : 00] Then almost jumping out of the page, as if the words were lighting up, 12 times, maybe more than 12, I counted 12 times in this chapter, the king and the king's sons are mentioned.

Failing David is still the king, the king, the king, and the king's sons. David is still anointed king, and his line is secure, even in this chapter, even in this chapter, partly dominated by Absalom, by Amnon, and Jonadab.

David is the king. The royal line is secure, and one day, his greater son will come who will deal with sin and death. The Bible has a name for that, and that name is grace.

So even here, grace is at work. And secondly, how, and secondly, these people here, who sin, who blaspheme, who murder, they are judged, not because they have sin in their hearts, which they carried out, not because they showed themselves capable of dreadful sins.

After all, David had committed these sins as well. The one difference is that David repented of his sins. David said in 1213, David said to Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord.

[31 : 34] That's the point. Not that David was better intrinsically than Absalom and Amnon and Jonadab. David said, I have sinned against the Lord.

David repented. And Nathan says, the Lord has put away your sin. Let's return briefly to our New Testament passages. Remember 1 Corinthians, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, murderers.

Listen to how the passage goes on. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God.

Then in Titus, immediately after, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, and the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.

so that being justified by grace, we might become heirs to the hope of eternal life. This passage, if any passage in the Bible does bleakly and grimly show us the reign of sin and death, the judgments of God working themselves out.

[33 : 08] But this judgment is one that can be avoided by repentance, by faith, by forgiveness, by being justified by his grace.

That I believe is what this chapter is saying to us today. Let's pray. God our Father, we thank you indeed for this story written for our learning.

Recognize in our own hearts the sinfulness of Amnon, the pride of Absalom, and the crookedness of Jonadab. But we thank you that by your grace you have provided a remedy. You have given, you have sent your son to die and to rise again so that our sins might be forgiven. And we praise you for this and ask that we may live lives which are shaped by grace until the Lord Jesus comes again.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.