

PUTTING YOUR LIFE BACK TOGETHER AFTER ITS BEEN BLOWN TO CRAP

Part I: A Life Blown to Crap

Psalm 88 is my favorite psalm. I'm thankful for this psalm, this and the imprecatory psalms, because they give us permission to feel and say things that we don't often consider very "christian". Have you ever felt like the author of Psalm 88? Like your life is collapsing around you? What do you do with people who are struggling with depression or dark times or who are in the midst of a major life upheaval like the death of a loved one, divorce, financial ruin, or a life altering sickness?

Consider this an interactive sermon. I want you to consider a few questions while we examine a bit of Scripture: What kind of advice would you give to someone going through real pain? What kind of role should you play? What do you do one month later? What kind of advice or words of wisdom would you want to hear? What should you be/not be doing?

I tried to think of a good example of a life being blown to crap and it came down between the story of David and Bathsheba and the story of Job. So we'll probably do both, but this week we'll look at David and Bathsheba. In their case, their lives blew up because of sin, so a lot of what they faced were the consequences of their actions. However, the longer we live, the more likely it is that we'll face some sort of life changing event.

As a preface to this study, one of the hardest things to do in studying the Bible is taking passages and immediately applying it to our modern situation. First, you have to see it from their culture, see what the passage was saying to the original hearer. Try to get a feel for how they were living and how they did things. Only then can you build bridges to our culture and time.

When I thought about the story of David and Bathsheba, one text got me to thinking: Psalms 51:4. You see, Psalm 51 was the psalm that David wrote when he was repenting of his sin with Bathsheba. David wrote to the Lord that "Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." But I wonder how Bathsheba saw things.

Let's look at their story. II Samuel 11:1 - 12:25. This is a familiar text, the story of David and Bathsheba, but the way we've usually been taught is from David's perspective. He was a man after God's own heart who slipped into sin. Or was led into it by a temptress. We're familiar with David's behavior, but the seeds of it were planted earlier. First let's look at another piece of scripture that this story plays against. In I Samuel 25, we see the story of how David got his wife Abigail in a lesson learned about using his royal power for his own ends. David and his men were starved from being chased around by Saul when they came across a wealthy land owner, Nabal. David's men were hungry but he ordered them to protect Nabal's servants while they tended their sheep. As the anointed king, David could've taken some sheep, but instead, he came as a beggar. Nabal spit on his gesture and David could've, and in fact was in route to, avenged himself on Nabal, but Abigail interceded. The Lord "removed" Nabal, upholding David's side of things and David took Abigail as his wife. Two things we learn here: 1) David has already learned a lesson on using royal power for personal ends; 2) David takes, at least, his third wife (Michal, Saul's daughter, and Ahinoam). In fact, II Samuel 5:13 points to David's growing harem.

Back to Bathsheba.

READ v. 1-5

We start chapter 11 with David at the peak of his power. He'd relaxed a little, gotten a little soft or lazy, and wasn't leading his campaigns the way kings were supposed to. This is

when Bathsheba first enters the story.

A. Her husband kept from her (v. 1). Uriah was one of David's trusted warriors, one of his royal guards. A doggedly faithful soldier. He had presumably been gone for some time on this military campaign. For Bathsheba, think of a wife who has her husband stationed overseas. She doesn't know when, or if, he's coming back, but she's expected to go on as if life is normal.

B. The rape (v. 4). If you know me at all, you know that I'm not going to lightly toss that word around. Most of my friends are women. I've counseled a lot of women in my day. I know the stats. Here's the thing though, we have this image of David being out and about minding his own business when this seductress tempts him. I want to make a case for another point of view.

She's out taking a bath. A normal small house didn't have room for bathing facilities. The wealthy had own room with a tub. More common was a shallow earthenware bowl with a ridge in the middle for the feet. In ancient Israel, a great deal of the business of living was done on roofs. Kings took their meetings there (I Samuel 9:25). In a city, water would have been collected in cisterns on the rooftop. It is a logical place to bathe. Otherwise, a full bath had to be taken in a spring or at a river. Let me give you an example from my family, though keep in mind that examples of what my family does is seldom especially helpful. My mother was raised in rural Jamaica. They didn't always feel like going down to the cave or a river to carry back water, so sometimes, when it rained, people would rush out to take showers. (Yeah, she regaled us kids with this story, so we'd have this mental picture of our mother and her neighbors prancing about their homes, naked with soap, while we're trying to eat.) Getting back to Bathsheba, people typically washed at the end of the day. Keep in mind, this wasn't high noon, this was evening. She wasn't parading about for everyone, especially the king. David had to get out of bed.

v. 4 *she came to him and he slept with her.*

All the commentaries I read emphasized that she was an unprotesting partner in this thing. And she may have been. However, a woman, in that time and culture, disobeying a king? Let's start with why Israel had a king in the first place. Israel looked around at other nations, saw how they were ruled, grew jealous, and thought that was what they wanted. They had an idea of what kings were and how they ruled. And what kind of power they held. It wasn't too long before this that the Israelites escaped the bondage of the Pharaoh. Kings ruled by divine appointment at the very least and were gods incarnate at the other extreme. Their whims were commands, their power absolute, and disobedience punishable by death. Think about that king/prince from *Braveheart*, when he rode around claiming the right of the first night, sleeping with the brides on their wedding night. It's not like those women were willing partners either.

C. The pregnancy (v. 4-5)

v. 4 *She had purified herself from her uncleanness.* This is the Biblical equivalent of one of those Jerry Springer "Are you my baby daddy?" episodes. She had just become ceremonially clean. [Leviticus is such a fun book—we read it with the wrong attitude. If you want to get a bead on what a day in the life of ancient Israel was like, check this book out. Plus, Leviticus 20 always cracks me up. There are rules for a reason.] Leviticus 15:28-30 details what the ceremonial cleansing was about. After the seven days of her menstruation. In other words, she wasn't already pregnant. [She had the doves to prove it].

Now in verses 6-25, David schemes to get Uriah drunk then later conspires to kill him. Bathsheba knew none of this. She's at home dealing with the guilt and other mixed emotions that come from her encounter with the king, whether she was willing or not. The next thing she

enters the story is in the next verse.

READ v. 26-27

D. Her husband's death (v. 26)

Now her husband was dead. Whether or not she was out to seduce a king or was taken by him, he died without knowing her guilt. She bore the guilt alone. Then she gives birth to David's son. Think about how even more devastating this must have been if she was an unwilling partner.

E. She gets remarried.

At first glance, this might seem like the beginning of a healing process, you know, the king makes right. But think of this: she was forced out of a one man-one woman relationship that she had with her husband. How she's forced (again, is she going to turn down the king?) to enter into a one man-many women situation. The "royal household", the harem, was a status symbol. Saul had a small one, David increased it, and Solomon's was the greatest. I'm sure they weren't over-compensating for anything. Harems were not only culturally acceptable, but were even expected of kings. And they were politically useful for the king to make alliances.

As chapter 12 opens, verses 1-14, Nathan rebukes David, David repents, and the Lord renders judgment. Bathsheba's story picks up again here.

READ v. 15

F. Her son gets sick and dies (v. 15)

When my oldest son, Reese, got sick during his first year, Sally and I were both up all night worrying. We kept giving him these room temperature baths to break his fever. We hovered over him, praying and worrying together. What does Bathsheba see?

READ v. 16-23

Her husband's all over the place, everywhere except with her. Don't get me wrong, I never want to judge how another person grieves, but I do want to think about what Bathsheba sees when she looks at her husband's reaction. David was a man after God's heart and we don't know where she is spiritually. We do know this, she's the mother of a sick child and the wife of a husband who isn't around. He may be off doing "godly" things, but all she knows is that he isn't with her. And you know that if his servants have to ask him questions, Bathsheba's hurt and pissed.

READ v. 24

Only then is it recorded that he comforted her.

G. She gets pregnant again.

All this happened in the span of a year. Sometimes life can take so many sudden or unexpected turns that it can take on a surreal quality. Almost like you are standing there watching it happen to someone else, except that it's you.

Now, David was also a psalm-writer, a creative outlet for what he was dealing with. This struck close to home for me because I'm also a writer. Life with a writer is often no joy for the spouse. For example, I don't journal. I used to beat myself up because writers are supposed to journal. But Sally pointed out that my stories are my journal. Whatever I'm struggling with or working through comes out in my project at the time. Right now, as I'm thinking through what faith means and how to cling to it through difficult times, I've noticed that is the theme of the projects that I am working on. Sally hated it when I was working on my first novel. It dealt with racial tension and all these demons I was working through regarding race. And she hated the moods it put me in, with me storming around the house hating white people. And that was a project I started before we were married. It didn't take me long to give up on making her read

my stuff. For one thing, she's not a big reader. For another thing, though, she hates seeing our life fictionalized.

I mention this because David went on to write Psalm 51. He was broken and contrite, the right place to be when coming before God after you've sinned. But I keep coming back to verse 4. How do you think Bathsheba reads that after the year that she had?

This brings us back to Psalm 88. Renee Alston, in her book *Stumbling Toward Faith*, puts her frustration this way:

“In desperation I raced toward things that pretended to ease the loneliness, the aching yearning broken emptiness I could never explain. I swallowed offered solutions without argument, though they tasted bitter, though I wondered if they were poison even as they went down. ... But when the pain, struggle, and doubt returned, it swept me under its power, and I found myself overwhelmed, feeling helpless, unloved, unvalued, and unsaved. All the “truths” that came to me in those powerful moments of “inner healing” had vanished from my consciousness. All my worth in God’s eyes dissipated, and I was left struggling for conviction that I mattered, convicted only of my brokenness, my terror, and my shame.

“The people praying over me didn’t know what to do with me. I frustrated them ... once real life crashed into me, and the despair presented itself to them as raw, vulnerable woundedness, they feared for my salvation and their own expectations of Christianity were threatened. My pain didn’t fit into their carefully prescribed solutions, their falsely created illusions of “what God does” and “who God is.” My questions, my despair, my broken stilted half-destroyed faith wasn’t good enough for their pat answers and had no place among them.

“Then I learned to pretend ... I welcomed my non-thinking, my ability to escape from my pain. I embraced their answers and buried my doubt and insecurity so deeply that I could deny it was ever there. ... and when the time came to open my hands and show my Christianity, I discovered I was clutching nothing.”

Your assignment for next week is to think about what advice you’d give to someone in real pain. Then read the book of Job. I know, it’s more homework than you have to do for an episode of Oprah. You don’t have to read the whole thing, but pay particular attention to the response of his friends. Then next week we’ll look at what our response should be as the church and friends, but also as the person who is going through those times.