

But What About, Part 5: Lament and Hope: The Bible and Sexual Assault

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So far we have considered God's design for our bodies, gender and sexuality within the context of the overarching Christian story. We are beautiful (created by God), and at the same time broken (corrupted by sin). Through Christ we are called to redemption, and both Christ-centered marriage and consecrated Christian singleness bear witness to this redemption. Finally, we live in the hope of glory (the final redemption of our bodies). In light of the Christian story, we can address the complicated, confusing, and dark realities that we face in this broken world. So far we have addressed homosexuality, transgender identity, and pornography. Today we will consider the Bible's teaching about sexual abuse and sexual assault. (Note: today's lesson includes material that may be disturbing.)

Current Definitions and Statistics

1. Definitions¹

- a. Sexual *assault* is the most general term, referring to various kinds of unwanted or nonconsensual sexual behavior or contact (by means of force, threats, manipulation, deception, abuse of authority, incapacitation, etc.).
- b. Sexual *abuse* usually refers to the sexual assault of a child
- c. *Rape* is a more specific term, referring to forced penetration
- d. There is some debate about how broadly or narrowly to define sexual assault
 - i. Legal concerns: what acts qualify as punishable by law, and what criminal penalties should be imposed? What kind of evidence should be required to convict someone of a crime, especially if only two people were present and their accounts differ? What kinds of services should the state offer to victims? To what extent should those previously convicted of sexual offenses be permitted to reintegrate into society following incarceration? (Answers to these questions vary widely by US state)
 - ii. Research concerns: broader definitions may result in inflated statistics; narrower definitions may exclude some victims. (Statistics vary in part for this reason, and also because most sexual assaults are not reported to authorities.)
- e. Many people have been wronged and harmed, even if their experience does not fit a researcher's definition or does not meet a criminal standard within their legal jurisdiction.

2. Prevalence and Patterns of Sexual Assault

- a. A commonly cited statistic is that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men have been or will be sexually assaulted within their lifetime.² This statistic seems to be well founded (if anything, it may be too low rather than too high).³ According to a 2010 survey by the

¹ For this section, see *Rid of My Disgrace*, chapter 2.

² *Ibid.*, 31 (also see the book's endnotes for detailed references).

³ It is widely acknowledged that most sexual assaults are never reported to authorities (for numerous reasons, including fear of retaliation, shame, mistrust of authorities, concern about public exposure, feeling overwhelmed, blaming oneself, etc.) However, the prevalence of false and/or unfounded allegations of sexual assault is disputed.

On one end of the spectrum, women have often been silenced, shamed, and blamed when they have come forward, often hesitantly, with testimonies of rape and sexual assault. In the case of some serial abusers, literally hundreds of women were abused before even one came forward to testify publicly. The irrationally negative, dismissive, or incredulous response which many survivors of abuse have received, has further compounded the damage already done to them, and has hindered attempts to hold perpetrators accountable.

On the other end of the spectrum, a commonly cited figure within the #MeToo movement is that only 2% of reports of sexual assault are false. By implication, the argument goes, if 98% of reports are true, we should believe all women who make such accusations, even if the accusations are made in the context of highly public and politicized controversies, even if the event in question happened in the distant past, and even if other witnesses fail to corroborate, or directly contradict, the claims made. But this perspective is also one-sided, and it is frankly unjust, as it leaves everyone vulnerable to potentially false accusations. It is also an overly simplistic portrayal of the data concerning sexual assaults reported to law enforcement.

Centers for Disease Control, 18.3% of women (about 22 million women) in the US had been raped.⁴ Five different studies in the 1990s and early 2000s concluded that between 14 and 18 percent of boys had been sexually abused before turning 18.⁵

- b. There is some good news. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, an annual survey conducted by the Department of Justice, the prevalence of sexual assault and rape in the US decreased by more than half from 1994 to 2010 and has remained fairly steady since then.⁶
- c. 80% of victims were sexually assaulted by someone they previously knew (e.g. relative, spouse, friend, dating partner, pastor, coach, teacher, boss, therapist, doctor) rather than by a stranger. Among child sexual abuse victims, over 90% knew the person who abused them.⁷ Perpetrators are rarely armed; only 7% possessed a weapon during the assault.⁸
- d. The vast majority of perpetrators (over 95%) are male.⁹
- e. The vast majority of victims (about 90%) are female.¹⁰ However, male victims of sexual assault should not be overlooked: they “are much less likely to disclose information regarding their experiences than are females” and “reported higher levels of distress than females on Trauma Symptom Inventory tests.”¹¹
- f. Victims of sexual assault in general, and of rape in particular, have been found to suffer disproportionately from depression, suicidal thoughts, and PTSD, and are significantly

Eight different studies in the US, UK, and Australia between 1990 and 2005 concluded that between 2 and 11 percent (the median is about 6.5%) of rape accusations reported to police were *demonstrably false* (that is, the evidence established that no crime had been committed or attempted). In addition, in each study, a larger number of rape accusations (an additional 8 to 20 percent, depending on the study) were categorized as *baseless* (that is, there was insufficient evidence to establish that a crime had been committed). Cases were classified as baseless for a wide variety of reasons: because the victim stopped cooperating with the investigation, because the police could not produce corroborating evidence, because the police did not find the witness to be credible, because there were inconsistencies in the victim’s statement, or because the event reported did not meet the current legal definition of a crime. It is important to emphasize that baseless accusations are not necessarily false; however, we cannot be confident of their truth or accuracy. In a study which examined reports of sexual assault (more broadly defined than rape) in the context of a university police department, only 35 percent of the initial reports were referred for disciplinary action or prosecution, while only 6 percent were deemed to be false; the largest category of reports (45 percent) were neither demonstrably false nor clearly warranting discipline or prosecution (for all the above statistics, see Lisak et al, “False Allegations of Sexual Assault: An Analysis of Ten Years of Reported Cases” available at <https://cdn.atixa.org/website-media/atixa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/12193336/Lisak-False-Allegations-16-VAW-1318-2010.pdf>).

In conclusion, while a relatively small number of reports of sexual assault are demonstrably untrue, there is a more significant number of situations where it is clear that something happened, and it is clear that the victim suffered harm, but we may not be able to know precisely what happened, or there is not enough evidence to convict the defendant of a crime.

Those who come forward with reports of sexual assault ought to be respected, supported, and treated with care on a personal level. Many of these people are personally vulnerable and exhibit symptoms of trauma. This is true regardless of whether their stories stand up under careful scrutiny in a court of law. At the same time, criminal or civil accusations must be carefully examined without immediately jumping to conclusions. Careful examination of victims’ testimonies *promotes* a low rate of false reports, and a low rate of false reports is a good thing that we should all want to preserve.

Finally, we should remember that even if someone’s behavior is deemed not to have been illegal or criminal, it may still have been immoral and harmful. The decision of any human judge is not the last word; only God’s verdict will be final.

⁴ “National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 2010 Summary Report” online at https://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS_Report2010-a.pdf. This percentage includes completed rape (12.3% of women), attempted rape (5.2% of women), and rape while under the influence of alcohol/drugs (8.0% of women). It seems that some women’s experiences fit into multiple categories and/or include multiple instances of rape.

⁵ Studies cited in *Rid of My Disgrace*, 217; see also <https://1in6.org/>

⁶ US Department of Justice, “Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994-2010” available at <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fvsv9410.pdf>.

⁷ *Rid of My Disgrace* cites the 80% figure overall (27) and 93% of child victims (33). The CDC survey from 2010 concluded that only 15% of sexual assaults were perpetrated by strangers.

⁸ *Rid of My Disgrace*, 34.

⁹ “National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 2010 Summary Report”, 34.

¹⁰ *Rid of My Disgrace*, 32, citing several surveys.

¹¹ *Rid of My Disgrace*, 35, 42.

more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs.¹² Common emotional responses to sexual assault include denial, shame, guilt, anger, distorted self-image, and despair.¹³

3. Sexual Abuse of Children

- a. Once again, published statistics vary because of differing definitions and because child sexual abuse often goes unreported. According to researcher David Finkelhor, 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys is a victim of child sexual abuse.¹⁴
- b. Over the last two decades, the problem of sexual abuse within religious communities has received increased attention.
 - i. This week, Rabbi Daniel Greer, a prominent figure in New Haven, was sentenced to 20 years in jail for repeatedly sexually abusing a teenage boy who was enrolled in his Orthodox Jewish yeshiva (boarding school) in the early 2000s.
 - ii. This past January, the Hartford Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church released a report listing a total of 48 priests and other official leaders who had been credibly accused of sexually abusing minors in the diocese, since the diocese was founded in 1953.¹⁵
 - iii. This past February, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that “since 1998, roughly 380 Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers have faced allegations of sexual misconduct” involving over 700 victims. “About 220 offenders have been convicted or took plea deals, and dozens of cases are pending.”¹⁶ This past June, the Southern Baptist Convention devoted much of its annual meeting to the topic of preventing sexual abuse and caring well for survivors of abuse in the church. The SBC released an extensive report as well as a curriculum for local churches.¹⁷
 - iv. Trinity Baptist Church has had a sexual abuse policy and procedures in place within our children’s and youth ministries for several years.¹⁸ But policy and procedures in themselves are not sufficient. The gospel of Christ calls us to cultivate a church culture that is more concerned with reality than with appearances. Christ is brutally honest about our sin and the suffering that it causes, and at the same time Christ is amazingly gracious toward sinners and sufferers. And so we want to deal seriously with sin – not to deny or minimize or excuse or justify sin, but to confront it in ourselves and in each other, to acknowledge that none of us are categorically immune to the deceitfulness of sin. We also want to walk with each other in suffering, not holding out the false hope of an easy, comfortable, and superficially

¹² A national survey in 1992 found that female rape victims were approximately three times more likely to suffer from depression, six times more likely to suffer from PTSD, five times more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol, and four times more likely to contemplate suicide” compared to other females (“Rape in America” online at <https://victimsofcrime.org/docs/Reports%20and%20Studies/rape-in-america.pdf?sfvrsn=0>). *Rid of My Disgrace* cites this study on p. 40, but gives misleading summaries of the alcohol/drug abuse figures. Today, RAINN says that child sexual abuse victims are “about four times more likely to develop symptoms of drug abuse, about four times more likely to experience PTSD as adults, and about three times more likely to experience a major depressive episode as adults” (<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/children-and-teens>).

¹³ These are the chapter titles in the middle section of *Rid of My Disgrace*.

¹⁴ See <https://victimsofcrime.org/media/reporting-on-child-sexual-abuse/child-sexual-abuse-statistics>. RAINN claims that “one in 9 girls and 1 in 53 boys under the age of 18 experience sexual abuse or assault at the hands of an adult.” But this statistic seems to exclude those who experience sexual abuse at the hands of someone under 18. According to federal government statistics, 58,000 children in the US (out of 73 million total children in the US) were found to have been victims of child sexual abuse through official investigations by Child Protective Services in the year 2017 (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/media/press/2019/child-abuse-neglect-data-released>). Again, this number represents only a small portion of children who are sexually abused.

¹⁵ Available online at <https://promise.archdioceseofhartford.org/credibly-accused/>

¹⁶ <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/Southern-Baptist-sexual-abuse-spreads-as-leaders-13588038.php>

¹⁷ See <https://caringwell.com/>.

¹⁸ The policy is available on our children’s ministry webpage: <http://trinity-baptist.org/childrens-ministry>.

happy life in Christ, but lamenting the persistent, deep, and widespread effects of sin in us and in our world. Even more, we want to be a people who look to Jesus, our Savior, and find in him grace that is greater than all our sin, and greater than all the ways we have been sinned against. The grace of Christ gives us hope even in the darkest valleys, for he has gone before us and his Spirit now walks with us. The grace of Christ empowers us to genuinely change, because his death has freed us not only from the penalty but also from the power of sin. We believe these are some of the big-picture gospel foundations for a healthy church culture that will help us to care well for survivors of abuse, to call former abusers to godly grief and repentance, and to prevent further sexual misconduct within the church.

Why do large segments of our secularized culture care so much about sexual assault, and why should Christians care about sexual assault?

- The dominant view of our culture is that sexual assault is evil because it is a *violation of an individual's autonomy* (an individual's personal freedom to choose whatever they want to do with their own body, which belongs to that individual and to no one else). Also, our culture idolizes sexual activity and sexual expression, so it is particularly sensitive to sexual assault because it seems to threaten an individual's freedom to pursue sexual activity and expression unhindered. Unfortunately, there are several weaknesses of our culture's dominant framework.
 - In this view, everything rests upon the consent of individuals. But do we always know what we really want? Do we always say what we really feel? Even our own hearts can deceive us, and our desires are easily swayed and often change over time. Our culture celebrates unfettered sexual expression; it tells us that sex can mean whatever we want it to mean; it gives us no moral boundaries to guide us, and leaves us to ourselves to decide what we want to do, and allows us to change our decision at any moment. No wonder our culture then struggles to define "affirmative consent." No wonder many who "consented" at the time later feel awful. Even many people outside the church are questioning whether the principle of consent alone is sufficient to guide the sexual relations of human beings.¹⁹
 - Our culture simultaneously expects and pressures us to be sexually active²⁰ *and* tells us that we should never be expected or pressured, no matter how slightly, into any form of sexual intimacy by any other individual. Isn't there a contradiction here?
 - In our culture's dominant view, healing is ultimately self-generated. Self-love, self-protection, self-affirmation, and self-reliance are all encouraged. But this can be a crushing burden to bear when one is emotionally fragile, anxious, depressed, self-hating, and filled with toxic shame. Also, the belief that healing is ultimately self-generated can foster other pathologies (e.g. eating disorders, hyper-vigilance, other ways of seeking to be in control of the unpredictable world around us).
- The biblical worldview fully agrees that sexual abuse and assault are violations of human dignity. However, the biblical worldview has deeper foundations and offers more enduring hope.
 - In the biblical worldview, sexual assault and abuse are violations of a body that *God* has created, onto which he has stamped *his* very own image. Our body is a temple, a sacred space, a precious gift, because God has fashioned it for himself. Sexual abuse and assault is ultimately a sin against God the Creator.
 - Further, sexual assault and abuse are violations of *God's good design for humanity*. God designed human beings to fulfill their calling through the exercise of self-giving love. One

¹⁹ Several examples are listed in the "Other Views" section of the Wikipedia article on "sexual consent":

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_consent#Other_views

²⁰ To give just one example of how pervasive this expectation has become, a 22 year old man recently told his doctor that he had never been sexually active. The doctor was incredulous, and needed to be persuaded. This is not an uncommon incident in a health system which prides itself on respectful care for people of all sexual orientations, but apparently celibacy is not included in that list.

expression of this self-giving love is the union of male and female bodies, lives, and resources within the marriage promise. In marriage, the bodies of husband and wife belong to one another (1 Corinthians 7:3-4); therefore, marriage provides the safe context for sexual intimacy.²¹ This positive understanding of God's purpose for humanity makes sense of why sexual assault is such a violation of human dignity expressed in self-giving love.

- The Christian church has always seen faithful marriage *and* celibate singleness as viable options, both of which hold promise for human flourishing. The church should be a place where sexual intimacy is neither idolized nor despised. We are far more than our sexuality.
- The Bible offers a better hope for significant healing from a source beyond ourselves. It does not remove our human responsibility or make us resigned to fatalism, but it tells us that we are beloved children of God through Christ. This alone is a deeply restorative truth.

Sexual Assault in the Bible

The first thing we notice is that the Bible is not silent about sexual assault. It does not pretend that such things do not happen or do not matter to God's people. The Old Testament is full of stories, and some of these stories include episodes that would fall into the category of sexual assault broadly defined (by means of threats, voyeurism, incapacitation, coercion, and abuse of authority). Here are several examples, along with some brief comments.

- *Threats*: Lamech boasts to his two wives that he has “killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me” (Genesis 4:23-24). What might this indicate about Lamech's ongoing relationship with his wives?
- *Voyeurism/Abuse of Authority*
 - Ham “saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers” (Genesis 9:22). However, it is not entirely clear what is going on in this episode.
 - David looked upon the naked Bathsheba from the roof of his palace (2 Samuel 11:2). Also, his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba is not specifically described as nonconsensual, but it clearly involved an imbalance of power.
 - In the midst of a drunken party, and while intoxicated himself, King Ahasuerus of Persia commanded his officials “to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at” (Esther 1:10-11). It is unclear exactly what the king was requesting Vashti to do, but Vashti refused to “show...her beauty” to an audience of drunken males, and the king was furious. The narrator implicitly presents Vashti as a woman of courage (Esther will later need to muster such courage before the king) and presents the Persian king's behavior as dishonorable and foolish.²²
- *Incest while Incapacitated*: when they are desperate and living in the middle of nowhere, Lot's daughters scheme to get their father drunk and then sleep with him while he is unaware, in order to continue their family line (Genesis 19:30-38).
- *Attempted Coercion*: Potiphar's wife attempts to compel her servant Joseph to sleep with her; Joseph flees and is falsely accused (Genesis 39:6-18).
 - Even though this is not the most common scenario, the Bible knows that women can also be sexual aggressors, and men are sometimes falsely accused. In Joseph's case, he was fired from his job and put in prison. He was later released (and promoted to a higher position), but Potiphar's wife was never punished.

²¹ Of course, sexual assault can happen between spouses, but it is foreign to the spirit of the marriage covenant.

²² This incident may not constitute sexual assault strictly speaking, but it could certainly fall into the category of sexual harassment.

- Joseph's example may provide comfort to those who are falsely accused and/or whose abusers are never brought to justice in earthly courts.
- *Fear of Sexual Assault*: Naomi says that it is good for Ruth to work in Boaz's field "lest in another field you be assaulted" (Ruth 2:22). Boaz says he has "charged the young men [working in his field] not to touch" Ruth (2:9). ("Touch" is a euphemism for sexual relations in the book of Ruth.)
 - Boaz is a godly man, watching out for the well-being of women in the midst of a world where women are often unprotected and dishonored.
 - Ruth is a godly woman who lives courageously (she goes out and works hard from early morning until late at night in an unfamiliar place, despite the dangers, in order to support herself and her mother-in-law) and wisely (she pursues marriage to Boaz, a man who will protect and honor her, and she avoids involvement with men of less honorable character).

The Old Testament also includes four extended narratives of forcible rape (either attempted or completed), the most flagrant and violent form of sexual assault. I have summarized the content and included some reflections on each story. (Note that biblical narrators rarely make explicit statements about the characters' intentions, or about the righteousness or wickedness of their actions. In most cases, they show rather than tell us what we need to know.)

- **Genesis 19**: The leaders of Sodom threaten to gang rape God's messengers. Though they are prevented from carrying out their intentions, this is a sign of Sodom's utter moral corruption and injustice, which cries out for God's active judgment.
 - The men of Sodom "both young and old...to the last man" surround Lot's house and demand to "know" (v 5) the two visitors whom Lot had received into his home for the night. (The visitors are angels, sent on a mission from God [v 1].) Lot begs the men of Sodom not to "act so wickedly" (v 7) and offers his two virgin daughters instead: "do to them as you please" (v 8). At this point, the two visitors intervene, strike the men of Sodom with blindness, and urge Lot to gather his family and leave the city immediately before God destroys it.
- *Reflections on Genesis 19*
 - "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave" (18:20). "The outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it" (19:13). A nation that is characterized by unrestrained sexual violence, perpetrated by its leaders, is wicked, dishonorable, and crying out for God's judgment to fall upon it.
 - Lot is foolish to bargain with such wicked people. Though Lot is a believer, he does not exert a godly influence in Sodom. Rather, he is gradually drawn into Sodom's corruption and himself needs to be rescued. He would be wise to flee.
 - In this episode, rape is portrayed as an expression of power and dominance, not as the product of an excessive or uncontrolled sexual desire. The men of Sodom threaten to rape the male visitors in order to dishonor and humiliate them, not because they are sexually attracted to them. Sexual assault of a male victim damages a man's sense of his masculinity in particular ways.
- **Judges 19**: The men of Gibeah behave just like the men of Sodom in Genesis 19. In effect, God's own people have become just as morally corrupt as the people of Sodom. This event provokes a national crisis within Israel.
 - Once again, an old man took in two visitors for the night (a Levite and his servant who are passing by). Then, "the men of the city, worthless fellows, surrounded the house" and demanded to "know" the Levite (v 22). (The Levite later interprets their desire as murderous: "They meant to kill me" [20:5].) The host once again begs the men of the city

not to “act so wickedly” (v 23) toward his guest, and offers them two women (his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine) instead: “Violate them and do with them what seems good to you” (v 24). The men “knew” the Levite’s concubine and “abused her all night until the morning” (v 25). In the morning, the woman was found dead on the front doorstep of the house.

- The Levite then cut his concubine’s dead body into twelve pieces and sent the pieces throughout the land of Israel. The rest of the Israelites were outraged: “Such a thing has never happened or been seen” (v 30). They all gathered together and agreed that the “worthless fellows” of Gibeah must be punished. When the tribe of Benjamin refused to hand over the men of Gibeah, the other eleven tribes attacked the tribe of Benjamin. This was not merely a private, localized matter that could be safely ignored at a distance; it called for united action on the part of the people of God as a whole.
- *Reflections on Judges 19*
 - When members or leaders of God’s church sexually abuse or violate others, the entire community of God’s people will be judged, unless it courageously holds those people to account, removes them from their positions of leadership, and excommunicates them from the church if they remain unrepentant.²³
- **Genesis 34:** While visiting “the women of the land”, Jacob’s daughter Dinah was raped by Shechem, the son of a local prince. Dinah’s brothers were furious and responded by plotting to kill every male in Shechem’s city.
 - Jacob’s daughter Dinah “went out to see the women of the land” (v 1). During her journeys, when Shechem “saw her, he seized her and lay with her and humiliated her” (v 2). Then “his soul was drawn to Dinah...he loved her and spoke tenderly to her” (v 3) and proposed to marry her.
 - When Dinah’s brothers heard about the marriage proposal (which also involved a broader alliance between their respective extended families), they were furious, and they acted deceitfully. They told Shechem that he could have Dinah as his wife, but only if all the males in his city were first circumcised. Shechem “did not delay to do the thing, because he delighted in Jacob’s daughter” (v 19), and the other men of his city promptly followed his lead. Two days later, “when they were sore” Dinah’s brothers Simeon and Levi “came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males...they took Dinah out of Shechem’s house and went away...they plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister” (vv 25-27). Jacob was displeased, because he feared reprisal from other local tribes; but Simeon and Levi responded to Jacob, “Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?” (v 31).
- *Reflections on Genesis 34*
 - In the face of sexual assault and abuse, anger is justified. “The men were indignant and very angry, *because* he had done an outrageous thing in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing must not be done” (v 7).²⁴ Dinah has brothers who stand up for her, who are angry on her behalf, and who insist on seeing justice done. Dinah is not left alone to bear the weight of being violated. The brothers’ solidarity with Dinah is a good thing (though it is sadly too rare; many female victims of sexual assault only find support from other women).

²³ The Israelites insisted on putting to death the “worthless fellows” of Gibeah for their heinous acts of rape and murder. The New Testament church is not authorized to use force to administer punishment; that responsibility belongs to governments today. However, the New Testament church is commanded to put out of its fellowship those who show themselves to be unrepentant (1 Corinthians 5), and to remove from leadership those who no longer meet the qualifications for elder or deacon (1 Timothy 3:1-13).

²⁴ This is a very strong statement in the context of Genesis; the author of Genesis rarely makes explicit moral commentary on the characters’ actions.

- Righteous anger can boil over into ungodly and destructive rage. Jacob’s initial protest to his sons seems cowardly and self-centered (“you have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land” [v 30]), but he does have a point. Later Jacob says of Simeon and Levi: “Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel” (49:7).
 - In this story, we see a twisted combination of humiliating sexual violence followed by intense romantic attraction and tender expression. This combination can be deeply confusing for victims of sexual assault, when a perpetrator expresses no repentance (or only superficial repentance) for violent, deceptive, or manipulative behavior, but nevertheless lavishes words of kindness and expressions of care on the victim, in an effort to regain the victim’s approval and trust.
- **2 Samuel 13:** King David’s daughter Tamar is raped and then cast away by her half-brother Amnon.
 - King David had several children by several different wives. David’s oldest son Amnon “loved” his beautiful half-sister Tamar and “was so tormented that he made himself ill, because...she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her” (v 2). The twisted nature of Amnon’s attraction is evident from the beginning. At the suggestion of his friend Jonadab, Amnon pretended to be ill, stayed in bed, and asked his father to send Tamar to his house so that she could make food for him. Tamar did so. Amnon then sent everyone else away and summoned Tamar to his bedroom, where he made his intentions clear. Tamar protested: “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.” But Amnon “would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her.” Amnon then “hated her with very great hatred” and sent her away, once again despite Tamar’s protests. Tamar then “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 last we hear of Tamar is that she “lived, a desolate woman, in her [full] brother Absalom’s house.”
 - Tamar did not receive the kind of immediate support from her male relatives that Dinah did. Her father, King David, was very angry, but said and did nothing. (David always appears to be relatively passive, disengaged, and indulgent toward his sons; and his adultery with Bathsheba, which immediately precedes this incident in 2 Samuel, further diminished his credibility and his courage to rebuke his sons in the area of sexual sin.) Her brother Absalom’s initial reaction was to say to Tamar, “Hold your peace, my sister. He is your brother; do not take this to heart.” Absalom also said nothing to Amnon initially. However, two years later, Absalom had Amnon murdered.
 - *Reflections on 2 Samuel 13*
 - Sexual assault has lasting emotional and relational consequences. These are powerfully depicted in this story. Tamar adopts the posture of a grieving woman, with ashes on her head. She weeps uncontrollably as she walks down the road. She tears her long robe, representing her dignity that has been torn apart. Amnon has used and discarded her like an object. She is now regarded as damaged goods, unfit for marriage to another man in her society. Even more, in the aftermath of her assault, she receives no sympathy from her brother or her father, only platitudes and silence. She lives the rest of her life as “a desolate woman.” Her cry is echoed by many victims of sexual assault and abuse: “Where could I go to get rid of my disgrace?”²⁵

²⁵ This is how the NIV translates it.

- Sexual assault is not the victim's fault.²⁶ Tamar is the only character in the story who displays consistent integrity and godliness. Amnon, Absalom, David, and Jonadab all manifest serious character flaws. By contrast, Tamar is hospitable toward her half-brother, cooking a meal for him when he is apparently sick and confined to bed. She is also courageous, declaring God's truth to Amnon (who was physically stronger than she) in no uncertain terms rather than merely yielding to his ungodly desires.²⁷ Her lament at the end of the story is also a righteous response to evil and injustice. In the Psalms and in the book of Revelation, the righteous sufferers cry out, "O Lord, how long?" (Psalm 6:3; Revelation 6:10). Tamar is among their company.

The unresolved story of Tamar, the righteous sufferer whose life ended in seeming desolation, points us to a fifth biblical example of humiliation, abuse, and violence. The New Testament gospels culminate in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ the Righteous One. Most of us do not normally associate the crucifixion of Christ with the offense of sexual assault. But consider what happened to Jesus on the way to the cross:

- He was betrayed by a close friend, with whom he had broke bread the night before.
- He was abandoned by those who had promised to remain with him always.
- He was stripped of his robe and violently beaten.
- He was mocked and spit upon, publicly humiliated and disgraced.
- He was put on display before a hostile crowd, naked and exposed (except perhaps for a loincloth).
- He was crucified "outside the camp" – in the place of defilement.
- His life ended in seeming desolation and disgrace.

And yet, our great hope is that the story of Jesus (who is also the only entirely righteous and godly character in all of Scripture) does not end with crucifixion and disgrace. Three days later, this same Jesus rose from the dead, conquering death and sin forever. Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame, for the sake of the joy set before him. What was that joy? It was the joy of bringing many sons and daughters with him – bringing us from shame and despair to everlasting joy and glory (Hebrews 2:10).

Truly this Jesus is, for all victims of sexual assault who will turn to him, "a merciful and faithful high priest...not...unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15).

There is even hope for perpetrators of sexual assault who will turn to Jesus. For he prayed from the cross even for those who were mocking him, who had crucified him: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). From the cross, he assured a repentant criminal, who had been condemned to die for his crimes: "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Jesus Christ offers hope to sinners and to sufferers (and in the end, we all belong to both groups in one way or another). In light of what Christ has done, Hebrews 4:16 invites us: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need."

²⁶ Of course, there are some situations where a victim has acted unwisely and/or sinfully, and it is appropriate and important to acknowledge this. But the point remains that the victim is not to be blamed for the perpetrator's sin.

²⁷ She is also tactful. She begins by appealing to the ultimate standard of God's law and the well-being of the Israelite community as a whole ("such a thing is not done in Israel"; it is "outrageous", signifying that it is a flagrant violation of God's law); she continues by pointing out the harm that she herself would endure ("where could I carry my shame?"); and she ends on a more pragmatic note, appealing to Amnon's own self-interest ("as for you, you would be as one of the outrageous fools") and even a practical suggestion ("please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you"). Her speech (like Joseph's to Potiphar's wife) indicates that her priorities are rightly ordered. Amnon's dismissal of her plea is a further indication of the depth of his wickedness.

Sexual assault and abuse are deeply damaging. But through Christ, significant redemption is possible. Our class today will conclude with a testimony from a survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

Resources

Justin & Lindsey Holcomb, *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault*. An excellent book to begin with, from a distinctly gospel centered perspective. Written to victims of sexual assault, also helpful for people who want to learn more and be equipped to minister to victims of sexual assault. Not an easy read, but honest and hopeful.

Lindsey Holcomb, *God Made All of Me*. This is a good resource for addressing issues of appropriate touch and preventing sexual abuse in age appropriate ways with young children.

Ed Welch, *Shame Interrupted*. Also not an easy read, but honest and hopeful. Addresses the human experience of shame more broadly. The book is Christ-centered and includes a wealth of biblical insights on an often neglected theme. Helpful for those who feel shame because of their own sin, and for those who feel shame because they have been sinned against.

“Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused” – See <http://caringwell.com>. This is a collection of Southern Baptist resources for local churches.

Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds*. If you are wondering about questions like “Do I need to forgive and reconcile with my abuser, or with someone else who has harmed me terribly?” this book is a good place to begin.

Jerram Barrs, *Through His Eyes: God’s Perspective on Women in the Bible*. Includes insightful meditations on several female characters in the Bible. The two chapters on King David’s daughter Tamar are particularly relevant to this topic.

Appendix: What about forgiveness? Do I need to forgive and reconcile with my abuser?

- In the Bible, God’s forgiveness is granted to those who turn from sin and believe in Christ. However, receiving forgiveness from God does not immediately or automatically remove all consequences of sin in this life.
- In a similar way, God instructs Christians to forgive those who have wronged them, if they are genuinely repentant of their sin (that is, not only saying “I’m sorry” but taking steps to change and to make amends). However, forgiving someone does not mean that what they did in the past should have no further consequences of any kind. For example, in some cases, it may be appropriate to extend forgiveness, but unwise to resume in-person or in-home contact.
- In the case of offenders who are unrepentant, we are not to repay evil for evil, but rather to “leave room for the wrath of God” (Romans 12:20). In other words, we leave the person in the hands of God and of the civil authorities whom God has appointed to administer justice in this life, and we pray that God would lead them to repentance.
- See Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness* for more on this difficult topic.