

## Gutless Guilt

Many years ago, as a young Christian, I came across the spiritual warfare theology which said that some satanic control and demonic influence in your life comes from your parents, grandparents and ancestors. Supposedly, a curse may be upon you because of your ancestors' idolatry or paganism or witchcraft. According to this teaching, you must set about verbally renouncing your attachment to these practices, and so break any generational curse that may be upon you. Well, there was plenty of that in my family, so I started renouncing my connections. Nothing major happened. My cat who was looking at me cynically for speaking out loud to no one in particular, yawned and stretched. And later, I began to think about the absurdity of having to track down and renounce all the idolatries of all my ancestors. Picture me trying to renounce every pagan deity that my ancestors in pagan France, Scotland, England, and Norway ever worshiped. It would take years. But more importantly, I came to realise that there was absolutely nothing in Scripture about generational curses. This idea was based almost entirely upon the words we read this morning, "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth *generations* of those who hate Me". That idea, repeated four times in Scripture, has become the basis for a whole theology of breaking generational curses.

But actually, it says nothing about curses, and never once tells you to use verbal incantations to distance yourself from Grandpa's Freemasonry or Aunt Petunia's Tarot Cards. What it says is that God's judgements for sin can extend to grandchildren and great-grandchildren, that God visits the iniquity of the fathers onto the third and fourth generation.

What does that mean? Now we have to be very careful and precise in understanding this doctrine. It doesn't mean that people are punished for sins they didn't commit. In fact, Ezekiel 18 specifically refutes this.

<sup>20</sup>The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

What does it mean?

First, the consequences of sin are multi-generational. We cannot sin in isolated ways, Our sins have consequences, and those consequences often go on for more than one generation. Adultery and divorce end up affecting children and their children. A man who gambles away his life-savings affects his children and his children's children. God wants us to know that sin will affect people, even after we are gone.

Second, the example of sin is transmitted across generations. Children inherit both natural traits and sinful dispositions from parents. But when parents sin in front of their children, it begin to authorise that sin in the child's eye. "This must be okay. I can do that, or do some version of it." God wants us to know that our example is shaping people for good or evil, and that will persist to the third or fourth generation.

Third, and this is probably the worst of the three, parents with guilty consciences tend to permit in their children what they themselves did. I call this gutless guilt. When you feel guilty about what you have done or what you did, and you have not adequately understood the work of Christ for you, then you can either become a hardened hypocrite, teaching and preaching against what you yourself practice, or you can become a cowardly, retreating, muted Christian who thinks that you cannot speak against what you know to be sin and what you yourself did. A wounded conscience is weakened authority. You will not rebuke, discipline, or confront what you are either tolerating in your own life, or what you still feel guilty over in the past.

We see this exemplified for us in the life of David in 2 Samuel chapters 13 and 14. We see David's

sin with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah affecting his children. His children begin to imitate what he did, in their own form. But the worst part of this whole account is how David responds to his children's sin. Clearly, he has no moral boldness to rebuke in them what he had done, to punish in them what he had done.

So set before our eyes today is not only a warning against sin, and seeing the laws of reaping what we sow, but also a warning against gutless guilt. Many a Christian, and many a parent, lives with gutless guilt. Their moral boldness has fled away. That's why when someone is sinning, they're the first to disguise their condoning of it as compassion and tolerance and mercy. When standards drop in a church or Christian institution, they're the first to welcome it as a sign of growing in grace and Christian freedom. Why? Because their consciences are wounded, and they are secretly glad when it seems sin is becoming more acceptable. They have never learned how to connect justification to sanctification – forgiveness in the gospel to fighting my everyday sin.

This period in David's life takes place about ten years after his sin with Bathsheba, the death of their child, and then birth of Solomon. At the end of chapter 12, we read of David completing the defeat of the Ammonites, and the beginnings of 22-year period of relative peace in which David was probably pre-occupied with plans for the Temple. These 22 years come to an end when his son Absalom usurps the throne. Chapters 13 through 20 all take place in these years. This morning we will fly over chapters 13 and 14. We can't read them all but we will read key verses that summarise the narrative, focusing mostly on David's response to the sins of his children. In these two chapters we see two responses of David to the sins of his children.

## **I. David Permits Sexual Sin By Amnon**

Here we meet David's grown or teenage children for the first time. Amnon, the first born is around 20. Tamar is his half-sister, they had different mothers, as you remember David took more than one wife. Tamar is about 19, while Absalom who has the same mother as Tamar is 18.

Amnon had picked up on his father's sinful sexuality, and warped it into his own version: incest. Amnon began to lust for his sister Tamar.

<sup>2</sup> Amnon was so distressed over his sister Tamar that he became sick; for she was a virgin. And it was improper for Amnon to do anything to her. (2 Sam. 13:2)

Birds of a feather stick together, and perverted Amnon had a wicked friend named Jonadab. Jonadab was actually his cousin, the son of David's brother Shammah. He came up with a plan where Amnon would feign illness, and ask his father to specifically send Tamar with food, so that he could be alone with her. This happens, and when he is alone with her, he tries to get her to consent. She does not.

<sup>12</sup>But she answered him, "No, my brother, do not force me, for no such thing should be done in Israel. Do not do this disgraceful thing! <sup>13</sup>And I, where could I take my shame? And as for you, you would be like one of the fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you." <sup>14</sup>However, he would not heed her voice; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her. <sup>15</sup>Then Amnon hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, "Arise, be gone!" (2 Samuel 13:12–15)

As always happens, when lust is satisfied, it is filled with contempt for the one it just used. She is forced out his room, and now goes back to her house in utter shame, horror and pain.

When she gets home, her brother Absalom knows what has happened. But with great deceptive

cunning, he quiets Tamar down by telling her, "forget about the rape, it is all in the family". But actually, he planned to kill Amnon, so by getting her to downplay the rape, it created a false sense of calm and normalcy for Amnon that Absalom could take advantage of in the future. Absalom was able to keep himself under control by simply ignoring Amnon. Absalom waited a full two years before avenging Tamar.

Now where is David in this?

<sup>21</sup>But when King David heard of all these things, he was very angry. <sup>22</sup>And Absalom spoke to his brother Amnon neither good nor bad. For Absalom hated Amnon, because he had forced his sister Tamar. (2 Samuel 13:21–22 )

That's it. That's the extent of David's response. He was very angry. What Amnon had done was worthy of death. Yes, there was a legal conundrum here, normally the male would be forced to marry the woman he had harmed, but half-brothers couldn't marry half-sisters. But that was just a technicality, because anyone could tell that this was a crime worthy of punishment. Incest was punished by death. But instead of bringing his son to justice, exposing the evil, vindicating his daughter, David simply fumes in his palace. There is no mention of a confrontation or even a rebuke of Amnon, let alone a trial. What is David doing?

His son has sinned sexually, and David does not have the moral boldness to rebuke it and expose it and deal with it. Why? Because he committed his own version of this. Yes, David is forgiven, but apparently he has not consistently worked that forgiveness out all the way. In Psalm 51, his psalm of confession of sin, he spoke in theory about the boldness he would now have.

Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners shall be converted to You.

Alfred Edersheim: "David left unpunished the incest of Amnon with Tamar, although committed under peculiarly aggravating circumstances... But a doting father, smitten with moral weakness, might find in the remembrance of his own past sin an excuse for delay, if not a barrier to action; for it is difficult to wield a heavy sword with a maimed arm."

But when you see your child doing what you did, and you know he knows that you did it, you hesitate. The word "hypocrite" flashes into your mind. The Accuser of the brethren seems to be standing there with folded arms. You retreat, and choose to just be angry, frustrated inside: angry at yourself, at your child. But this is actually unbelief, cowardice, refusal to face your own sin again, and call it sin, and run to the cross, and hate it in yourself and hate it in your child, and rebuke it.

David's gutless guilt manifested in a second way.

## **II. David Permits Murder By Absalom**

Absalom was willing to wait two full years to bring about his revenge. Not far from Jerusalem, on Absalom's property, it was sheep-shearing time, a merry, festive time in Israel. Absalom invites the king, knowing full well that the king will be declined. But if the king cannot come, then surely the heir-apparent, the firstborn Amnon can come in his place. And all the sons are invited, so that Amnon does not appear singled out. The king is at least initially suspicious.

<sup>26</sup>Then Absalom said, "If not, please let my brother Amnon go with us." And the king said to him, "Why should he go with you?" <sup>27</sup>But Absalom urged him; so he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him.

Remember how David had tried to get Uriah drunk? Well, Absalom learnt that trick from Dad really well.

<sup>28</sup>Now Absalom had commanded his servants, saying, "Watch now, when Amnon's heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, 'Strike Amnon!' then kill him. Do not be afraid. Have I not commanded you? Be courageous and valiant." <sup>29</sup>So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded. Then all the king's sons arose, and each one got on his mule and fled. (2 Samuel 13:26–29)

This is not capital punishment through the courts, following due process with witnesses. This is murder, pure vengeance through deceit.

Now what follows is that first some broken telephone takes place: someone gets the idea that all the king's sons have been murdered by Absalom, and that comes back to David. But then the error gets corrected, and David knows that Absalom has murdered Amnon alone.

As for Absalom, he knows, at least for the moment, he needs to get out of town.

<sup>37</sup>But Absalom fled and went to Talmai the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son every day. <sup>38</sup>So Absalom fled and went to Geshur, and was there three years. (2 Samuel 13:37–39)

Talmai is actually Absalom's grandfather. Talmai gave his daughter Maacah as a wife to David as a way of forging peace between Israel and the nation of Geshur. Maacah is the mother of Absalom and Tamar. So Absalom goes to a foreign nation where the law of Israel will not catch up with him, and a nation that is in a permanent peace treaty with Israel. He had been scheming this for years, and now he remains there for three years.

How is David dealing with Absalom the murderer? Sending a party to demand his extradition? Setting up a tribunal to try his son for murder?

<sup>39</sup>And King David longed to go to Absalom. For he had been comforted concerning Amnon, because he was dead. (2 Samuel 13:39)

After enough time, David is now missing his boy, his little lambkin murderer. Why is he not punishing murder, and murder by deception? Well, let's see. Had David ever murdered a man by means of deception, getting an accomplice, Joab, to send a man named Uriah into a particularly hot and undefended part of the battle? Yes. And had David been tried for murder? No, he had not. God had had exceptional mercy upon him as the king, as the subject of the Davidic covenant. And now, as he looks at his son, his wounded conscience makes him gutless. He was too gutless to punish Amnon for rape, and so Absalom punished him in personal vengeance. He didn't punish Amnon, can he now punish Absalom? One committed the kind of sin David committed on Bathsheba, the other committed the kind of sin David committed on Uriah.

So David is now showing the classic signs of gutless guilt. On the one hand, he knows Absalom should be brought back and face justice, but on the other he wants to see Absalom as a father, but he can't have both. So he chooses the passive option, and just lets Absalom stay in exile.

At this point, someone else enters the picture, another person that David has no moral boldness to confront, and that is his general Joab. Joab was part of his murderous act on Uriah, and now has a power over David that few have. Perhaps Joab at this point favoured Absalom. Perhaps Joab became concerned that the next in line for the throne was banished, and Israel needed to have a prince back in Jerusalem. For whatever reason, Joab wanted Absalom back.

So Joab tried the Nathan technique. He found a woman who could come to David and tell a story, which would supposedly pull on the heartstrings of David and cause him to bring Absalom back.

She has a simple story to tell. Her sons had a Cain and Abel fight, one murders the other. The murdering son should now be put to death, but as a widow, that would leave her with no one to take care of her. She asks that David would protect and pardon her surviving son the murderer. David eventually makes an oath that he will do so. But now he has trapped himself, being willing to pardon a murderer he doesn't know to protect her inheritance, but not pardon a murderer he does know, to protect the Lord's inheritance.

<sup>12</sup>Therefore the woman said, "Please, let your maidservant speak another word to my lord the king." And he said, "Say on." <sup>13</sup>So the woman said: "Why then have you schemed such a thing against the people of God? For the king speaks this thing as one who is guilty, in that the king does not bring his banished one home again. <sup>14</sup>For we will surely die and become like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. Yet God does not take away a life; but He devises means, so that His banished ones are not expelled from Him. (2 Samuel 14:12–14)

David knows he has been publicly trapped. But he also knows poor widows from small towns in Israel don't usually arrive in Jerusalem to trap the king into bringing back banished princes.

<sup>19</sup>So the king said, "Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?" And the woman answered and said, "As you live, my lord the king, no one can turn to the right hand or to the left from anything that my lord the king has spoken. For your servant Joab commanded me, and he put all these words in the mouth of your maidservant..." <sup>21</sup>And the king said to Joab, "All right, I have granted this thing. Go therefore, bring back the young man Absalom."

<sup>22</sup>Then Joab fell to the ground on his face and bowed himself, and thanked the king... <sup>24</sup>And the king said, "Let him return to his own house, but do not let him see my face." So Absalom returned to his own house, but did not see the king's face. (2 Samuel 14:19–24)

Again, here is more gutless guilt. David wants to see Absalom, but also doesn't want to. He wants him close, and at arm's length. If he brings Absalom into his court then David must formally pardon him for his murder, and David's own wounded conscience doesn't want to do that. But if he leaves him in exile, then he is being inconsistent and he doesn't want to do that.

A guilty conscience can be neither fair nor firm. It can neither oppose sin firmly and rebuke and bring discipline, nor can it tenderly embrace the repentant sinner, and welcome home the prodigal. The wounded conscience lives in the no-man's land between forgiveness and punishment, between condemnation and grace. It lives in the lukewarm world of self-protectiveness with no moral boldness.

For two, nearly three years, Absalom lives in a kind of house arrest at home. But make no mistake, Absalom is not a repentant, sorrowful, prodigal son. This is a wicked, egotistical, spoilt playboy prince. He is the heartthrob bad boy, stealing the hearts of the gullible.

Now in all Israel there was no one who was praised as much as Absalom for his good looks. From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. <sup>26</sup>And when he cut the hair of his head—at the end of every year he cut *it* because it was heavy on him—when he cut it, he weighed the hair of his head at two hundred shekels according to the king's standard. 2 Sa 14:25–26

Ask yourself what kind of narcissism it takes to weigh your own hair every year. For two years, Absalom is under a kind of house-arrest, trying new hairstyles, but undoubtedly bored, and frustrated that he is not getting any close to claiming the throne for himself.

So he calls for Joab, who got him there in the first place.

But Joab knows that he has come very close to crossing the line in just getting Absalom into Jerusalem. If he is seen in Absalom's house, it will look like treason. So Joab ignores Absalom's requests. Now see the kind of character of Absalom on display.

<sup>30</sup>So he said to his servants, "See, Joab's field is near mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire." And Absalom's servants set the field on fire. <sup>31</sup>Then Joab arose and came to Absalom's house, and said to him, "Why have your servants set my field on fire?" <sup>32</sup>And Absalom answered Joab, "Look, I sent to you, saying, 'Come here, so that I may send you to the king, to say, "Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still." ' Now therefore, let me see the king's face; but if there is iniquity in me, let him execute me." (2 Samuel 14:30–32)

This is a spoilt brat in action. You won't come when I call? Fine, I'll just key the side of your new car, or throw your laptop into the pool. Absalom is not repentant, he is just frustrated. Why be in Jerusalem if I can't get closer to the king and have my freedom? Take me to the king and try me for crimes, or let me live in exile with my grandfather.

And of course, in this sense, Absalom is exactly right. He is seeing things more clearly than David. Either find the man guilty of murder and execute him, or exile him, or pardon him. But this halfway, live-in-Jerusalem-but-with-a-cold-shoulder approach is neither justice nor mercy.

So David brings him back, but there is no sign that Absalom repents, confesses or asks for forgiveness. He is getting a unilateral pardon from his father, whose own cowardice has manipulated him into this situation.

<sup>33</sup>So Joab went to the king and told him. And when he had called for Absalom, he came to the king and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king. Then the king kissed Absalom. (2 Samuel 14:33)

Gutless guilt leads to this kind of end.

When we have dealt with our sin properly by repenting of it and confessing it to God, trusting in the merits of Christ, we need to continually work on our conscience. That is, we need to know how to respond when we are reminded of our past sin, or when we hear of others committing the same sin, or when we see it done by our children, or our friends. It is normal to feel convicted, and feel momentary shame over that. But if you then shrink back into guilt, you will either do nothing, or find yourself condoning sin in others, or turning a blind eye, or maybe even slouching back towards it yourself. All of that is retreating from the glorious forgiveness in Christ.

The right response is to say, Christ has forgiven me of that sin, and that is why I continue to fight it in myself and in others. And I fight it, not with the proud and haughty judgementalism of one who has not sinned, but with the firm tenderness of one who has fallen and felt the pain and shame. I rebuke sin as a forgiven sinner, not as sinless.

I know of a pastor who, before he was in ministry, fell into sin with his girlfriend. She fell pregnant, but they were repentant, confessed the sin and were married, and their child was born. They built their lives further on the Word, had more children and ended up in ministry. Many years later, they took their son aside, and explained to him, through tears, that he had been conceived when they were in sin. They sought his forgiveness and explained how God had worked in their hearts. They took their guilt to the cross, showed their son, and helped him see grace. God used that to strengthen that young man's faith, and today he is in seminary, studying for the ministry.

You see, that's an example of gutsy guilt, not gutless guilt. They knew they were forgiven in Christ, so they took that reality, asked forgiveness from their son, and explained to him how not to do that in his life.

Imagine if David had sat Amnon and Absalom and Solomon down, and explained what he had done wrong. And then he could have explained the forgiveness he found in God. And then explained how he wanted to flee from that sin in his life, and pointed his sons to God's grace, God's Word, God's enablement. Who knows what might have been avoided? Who knows if sin and sin's consequences would have been averted across generations? And even if Amnon and Absalom had gone ahead with their sin, David's own moral boldness would have been present to rebuke, and even bring justice on his sons. He would have known in his heart, "Yes, I sinned in this way, but I showed my sons another way. I humbled myself and confessed to them as well. They have no excuse."

Here's how we stop the consequences of sin travelling across generations. We get the gospel right in our own lives first. Wholeheartedly, you must turn from your own sin, and embrace and accept Jesus Christ, the Son of God and true Messiah as your Saviour from sin and Lord of your life. You must turn and trust. And then, believing that your sins are paid in full, you must keep fighting sin in your life, knowing that the sins you fight are forgiven sins, defeated sins. You confess every time you fail, not to get saved again, but because saved children of God own and admit their sins. With that clean conscience, you can tenderly, but firmly address sin in your children, and in the lives of others. That's the moral boldness of the gospel.

<sup>1</sup>The wicked flee when no one pursues, But the righteous are bold as a lion. (Proverbs 28:1)

Do you have the moral boldness that comes from believing the gospel, and living in light of the gospel? Seek it, and break generational sin the biblical way.