

Drawing Closer to God through Suffering

2 Samuel 13-18

It's been said that "if you live long enough, you will suffer" (D. A. Carson). It is a sobering thing to ponder, isn't it? If you live long enough you will suffer. It varies from person to person and family to family, but certain types of suffering are common:

- We suffer physically; we live in mortal bodies that wear out and break down and malfunction in all sorts of ways.
- We suffer relationally; instead of being nourishing and healthy, relationships with family, friends, coworkers, etc. often bring turmoil and heartache.
- We suffer when others die – either from "natural causes" or from an accident or violence.
- As followers of Christ, we sometimes suffer because of our faith; sometimes people oppose us. In many parts of the world believers are imprisoned, tortured, and killed for their faith. Suffering is common in this world.

That being the case, it only makes sense that we make peace with the fact that we *will* suffer and experience heartache in this world. We can't anticipate the specific types of suffering we'll experience, but we should anticipate that some type of suffering will find us. The question we need to consider is, "*When* I experience suffering, will it draw me closer to God or will it push me away from God?" Suffering can move us either direction.

An Inventory of David's Suffering (2 Samuel 13-18)

Today we are going to consider the events that are recorded in 2 Samuel 13 through 18. I'll obviously be summarizing large swaths of what is written in these chapters. These chapters give an account of the ways in which David suffered over approximately a six-year period of time. In many ways David was his "prime of life." The kingdom was established; the surrounding nations were subdued; he enjoyed material prosperity; he had a large family that should have brought him great joy. But David experienced the type of suffering and heartache that just takes your breath away. The thing I also want us to notice is that David grew closer to God through his suffering; he experienced God in the midst of his suffering. Instead of becoming hardened and bitter, David's heart was softened through his suffering. And so David serves as an example of how we can be drawn closer to God through suffering.

I will move rather quickly through these chapters, giving an inventory of David's suffering. As we go along, we'll notice three specific evidences of David being drawn closer to God through his suffering. This will give us a template for experiencing God when we suffer.

The rape of David's daughter (by his son Amnon) – 2 Samuel 13

2 Samuel 13 records how David's son Amnon fell in love with his half-sister, Tamar. Through deception Tamar was lured into Amnon's bedroom where he propositioned her. When she refused, he forced himself on her. Afterwards, he despised Tamar and kicked her out of his house. Do you know what David did when he found out what happened? Not a thing. He was angry but he didn't discipline or punish Amnon in any way. David's inaction left the door wide open for revenge by Tamar's full brother, David's son, Absalom.

The murder of David's son Amnon (by his son Absalom) – 2 Samuel 13

Absalom plotted for two years, eventually creating the opportunity to execute Amnon for what he did to Tamar. At first David was under the impression that Absalom had murdered *all* of his sons, but he eventually understood that only Amnon was dead. In response to this news we read in 13:36:

36 As soon as he had finished speaking, behold, the king's sons came and lifted their voices and wept; and also the king and all his servants wept very bitterly.

The exile of Absalom – 2 Samuel 13

Thinking that David would punish him for killing Amnon, Absalom fled for refuge to the city of Geshur. For three years Absalom was in exile. We are told in verse 37:

37 . . . And David mourned for his son every day.

Even though Absalom had executed another of his sons, David mourned for Absalom every single day. But we learn in verse 39.

39 The heart of King David longed to go out to Absalom; for he was comforted concerning Amnon, since he was dead.

You can imagine the conflicting emotions David experienced. On the one hand, he was heartbroken over Absalom killing Amnon; on the other hand, Absalom was still his son. But David didn't do anything to bring him back from exile.

The return of Absalom and his estrangement from David – 2 Samuel 14

After three full years Joab convinced David to bring Absalom back from exile. We read in 14:23-24:

23 So Joab arose and went to Geshur and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. 24 However the king said, "Let him turn to his own house, and let him not see my face." So Absalom turned to his own house and did not see the king's face.

David brought Absalom back from exile, but he didn't bless him with relationship. Absalom was home, but he was still estranged from his father. I haven't experienced this personally, but some of you know all too well that being estranged from one of your children is an oppressive type of suffering. David's estrangement from Absalom was the soil in which Absalom's rebellion grew and blossomed into full-blown revolt. But in verses 25 and 26 we're given a description of Absalom that helps us understand what happens later:

25 Now in all Israel was no one as handsome as Absalom, so highly praised; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no defect in him. 26 When he cut the

hair of his head (and it was at the end of every year that he cut it, for it was heavy on him so he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head at 200 shekels by the king's weight.

Just as Saul was described as “a choice and handsome man, and there was not a more handsome person than he among the sons of Israel” (1 Samuel 9:2), Absalom is described as the type of person who would naturally be seen as a leader (whether he had the necessary character or not).

After two years of being ignored by his father David, Absalom sets Joab’s field on fire just to get his attention. Joab was persuaded that David should at least meet Absalom face to face and reestablish the relationship. David agreed (verse 33):

33 So when Joab came to the king and told him, he called for Absalom. Thus he came to the king and prostrated himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom.

The revolt of Absalom and the exile of David – 2 Samuel 15

Eventually Absalom came to the conclusion that he should be king instead of his father. Through a carefully-crafted plan of convincing people that he would provide justice in a way that David didn’t, Absalom “stole away the hearts of the men of Israel.” Eventually he set in motion a plan to take control of Jerusalem and be named king of Israel. When David found out about the plan, he fled from Jerusalem along with those who were loyal to him (hundreds of people). Let’s pick up the narrative in verse 30:

30 And David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, and wept as he went, and his head was covered and he walked barefoot. Then all the people who were with him each covered his head and went up weeping as they went.

David grieved over having to abandon Jerusalem. As when Jesus walked this path a thousand years later, the Mount of Olives was a place of anguish of soul. To make matters worse, we learn in verse 31 that one of David’s trusted advisers, Ahithophel, had betrayed David and become an adviser to Absalom:

31 Now someone told David, saying, "Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom." And David said, "O LORD, I pray, make the counsel of Ahithophel foolishness."

Ahithophel may well be the “companion and familiar friend” of Psalm 55 who had betrayed David. Here we have the first evidence that David was drawn closer to God through suffering: *he prayed*. He didn’t panic; he turned to God and prayed that He would intervene. We learn in the rest of the chapter that David had a plan to thwart Ahithophel’s counsel (by planting Hushai in Absalom’s court). But fundamentally, David trusted in God; we know that because he prayed. We also know that David prayed because the heading of Psalm 3 tells us that it was written by David when he was fleeing from Absalom.

The taunting of Shimei – 2 Samuel 16

As David came to the village of Bahurim, a man named Shimei (a descendant of King Saul) came out and cursed David:

6 He threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David; and all the people and all the mighty men were at his right hand and at his left. 7 Thus Shimei said when he cursed, "Get out, get out, you man of bloodshed, and worthless fellow! 8 "The LORD has returned upon you all the bloodshed of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. And behold, you are taken in your own evil, for you are a man of bloodshed!"

As you might imagine, one of David's men offered to go and cut off Shimei's head. But David's response surprises us. When Nabal had insulted him, David was eager for revenge, but this time something was different. David responded with *humility* – the second evidence that he was drawn closer to God through his suffering.

11 Then David said to Abishai and to all his servants, "Behold, my son who came out from me seeks my life; how much more now this Benjamite? Let him alone and let him curse, for the LORD has told him. 12 "Perhaps the LORD will look on my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day."

David actually entertained the possibility that Shimei was speaking on behalf of the Lord. Since he couldn't be sure, he would rather endure Shimei's cursing than take revenge. And so he entrusted himself to God instead of taking revenge. David responded with humility – submitting to God's discipline and God's sovereignty.

Absalom's occupation of Jerusalem – 2 Samuel 16-17

In 16:15 we're told that Absalom and those loyal to him entered and occupied Jerusalem. When he asked for Ahithophel's advice, this is what we read:

21 Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Go in to your father's concubines, whom he has left to keep the house; then all Israel will hear that you have made yourself odious to your father. The hands of all who are with you will also be strengthened." 22 So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof, and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel.

Apparently, in that day a new king would assume the harem of his predecessor. That's what Absalom did. We recognize this as the fulfillment of Nathan's prophecy after David's sin with Bathsheba. He had prophesied that someone from his own household would "lie with [his] wives in broad daylight" (12:11). Absalom pitched a tent on the same roof David had been walking upon when he spotted Bathsheba, and he had relations with his father's concubines. This was one more public humiliation for David.

Absalom's death – 2 Samuel 18

Eventually Absalom led his troops into battle to wipe out those who had fled with David. David, of course, organized his troops for battle – as he had done when he was in the wilderness fleeing from Saul. But David gave explicit instructions to Joab, his commander, to “deal gently” with Absalom should they encounter him in battle. In other words, David instructed them to spare his life. The army of David prevailed:

7 The people of Israel were defeated there before the servants of David, and the slaughter there that day was great, 20,000 men. 8 For the battle there was spread over the whole countryside, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword devoured.

Notice what happened to Absalom (verse 9):

9 Now Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. For Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. And his head caught fast in the oak, so he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him kept going.

When Joab, David’s commander heard what happened, instead of sparing his life. . .

14 Then Joab said, "I will not waste time here with you." So he took three spears in his hand and thrust them through the heart of Absalom while he was yet alive in the midst of the oak. 15 And ten young men who carried Joab's armor gathered around and struck Absalom and killed him.

You can imagine David’s reaction when he heard what had happened to Absalom.

33 The king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And thus he said as he walked, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

These are some of the most gut-wrenching words in the entire Bible. Almost every parent would say that same thing, “I wish I had died instead of you.” **Mourning** is the third evidence that suffering brought David closer to God. 2 Samuel 19 describes David’s mourning in greater detail. We don’t know everything we might like to know about what was happening to him psychologically, but we have every evidence that David mourned well. Absalom’s death was the culmination of this entire tragic series of events that involved, rape, murder, estrangement, revolt, exile, and death. His commander Joab didn’t like that David was crying out in a loud voice (19:4) “O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son.” But his mourning was evidence that his heart was still tender (not hardened).

This catalog of David’s suffering reminds us that sin, suffering, and broken-heartedness are part of life in this fallen world. If you live long enough, you will suffer. This catalog of suffering also points the way concerning how we can draw closer to God in the midst of suffering.

Drawing Closer to God through Suffering:

Prayer (2 Samuel 15:31, Psalm 3, Psalm 55) We've already seen how David prayed in the midst of his suffering. He didn't merely worry and stew over the tragic things that happened to him. He prayed prayers of petition: he asked God to intervene. He also prayed deep prayers of lament. He poured out his complaints before God (see Psalm 3 and 55).

I've been blessed by talking with numerous people who embody what I'm describing. I can think of people who have told me, "I pray to God *all the time* . . ." in relation to some aspect of suffering.

If you're going through some type of suffering, I would simply have you consider whether or not you're really praying about what you're experiencing, or whether you're only worrying about it. Prayer is a wonderful gift that allows us to unburden our hearts before God and (consequently) live with the confidence that we've entrusted the issues of our lives to Him. If he doesn't intervene and change our circumstances, at least it won't be because we haven't asked. Prayer should be an integral aspect of our response to suffering.

Humility (2 Samuel 16:5-14, 1 Peter 2:21-25) David's humility was evident in the way he responded to the man who cursed him and threw stones at him. He was willing to consider the possibility that God was speaking to him through his enemy. Such humility was evidence that his heart was being drawn back to God.

We're actually going to do a sermon series on humility for Advent this year. We'll explore various aspects of humility then. But for now, I wonder if you can think of a way to humble yourself in the midst of your suffering. Not everyone who suffers ends up humble. Some end up hardened and bitter and proud. But those who humble themselves experience God's grace.

One aspect of humility is acknowledging God's sovereignty over our suffering, acknowledging that He has authority over our lives no matter what we go through. And like David, humility might even involve showing love toward the person who is causing your suffering.

Mourning (2 Samuel 18:33, 19:4, Matthew 5:4) David's mourning was good and healthy, reminding us of what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:4):

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

To mourn is to grieve over some circumstance or some loss. When you mourn, you enter into your pain and allow your loss to wash over you. You don't keep a stiff upper lip and you don't pretend that everything is okay. When you mourn you grieve over the fact that things are *not* okay and over the possibility that things *won't* be okay this side of heaven. Jesus pronounces blessing on those who mourn in the kingdom because they will be comforted. Mourning is good; when we pretend that things are okay when they aren't, we're really running from God.

I remember a comment that a well-meaning friend made to me at my father's funeral in 1990. When he saw me teary leaving the grave-side, he said to me, "Don't cry; it's gonna be alright." I

know his heart; he was trying to comfort me. But I wish he'd said, "If you feel like it, go ahead and cry like a baby because you won't see your dad again in this life."

I would say the same thing to you here this morning. Some of you here today are absolutely brokenhearted. You're suffering in some way and your heart is broken. Jesus says that in the kingdom you are blessed if you mourn. This may be news to you. You might have thought that your pain and loss disqualified you from experiencing God's favor. But unless you mourn, you won't be comforted. If you mourn in the presence of God He will meet you in the midst of your grief and loss. You will be comforted; Jesus will bind up the brokenhearted.