

David and Suffering 2 Samuel 12:13-29

We're looking at the life of David, and today we're going to look at an event in David's life that stunned those who first witnessed it. And it's how a man, struck down with grief could get back up and live. And not just live as if nothing had happened, but be changed for the better. And what the people who first witnessed this wanted to know was, how can you do that? And the answer has lots to teach us for when we suffer.

2 Samuel 12:13-29

Three points: David knocked down; David standing up, and David back in the fight.

David Knocked Down

When I was a doctor working on the neonatal intensive care unit, I had more experience than I would like at breaking bad news. And sometimes, when I told a young mum or dad that their baby had died, or had suffered some catastrophic brain injury, they would physically crumple and collapse, and grope for a chair, or fall to their knees.

And maybe you've experienced a time like that. You go through something, or receive some terrible news, and it blows you away. It's as if the ground is taken from under your feet, and either literally, or metaphorically, you're knocked to the floor, and for days it feels like you can't get up.

And that's what David is going through here. His baby son is seriously unwell, and David is on the carpet. Verse 16, 'And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground.' And he desperately wants the child's life to be spared – so much so that his staff worry for his mental and physical health, as he pleads with God to save his child.

But that's what's so troubling about this account isn't it? Because, v15, it's 'the Lord [who] afflicted the child.' And the idea that God might be making this baby suffer in retribution for David and Bathsheba's sin is difficult to swallow, to say the least.

So is he? Is David's baby son sick because God is punishing David for his adultery and murder? Well, on first glance, yes. Nathan rebukes David for his sin. David confesses. Nathan says, you're forgiven... *but*. Verse 14, 'Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you shall die.'

And yet, there's a problem with that, because just before, in response to David's confession and repentance, Nathan said, v13, "The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die." And when he says that God has put away his sin, it sounds like the Day of Atonement, when Israel's sins were put on the head of a scapegoat and sent away, put away, into the desert – never to come back, never to be remembered by God, never to be charged to Israel's account. And so, when Nathan says David won't die, he's saying that David won't be punished for this sin, because, in his grace, God chooses to remember it no more.

So... this can't be punishment. And yet it's clearly a consequence of David's sin. So... if it's not punishment, what is it?

Well, look again at what Nathan says, v14, “Because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child... shall die.” And to scorn someone is to show them contempt; it’s to dismiss them and treat them way more lightly than you should. And that’s what David’s done with God. As we saw last week, David has allowed power to seduce him; to be the thing that determines what he thinks, how he acts, what he most values, how he feels about himself. And so rather than this being punishment, rather than it simply being a consequence of David’s sin, or justice being seen to be done, this is God dealing with David’s heart issue of power and control. You see, remember a few weeks back how God promised David that he would use him to establish a family line through which salvation for the whole world will come? Well, for that to happen, David’s desire for power, and his using of power for his own ends, the grip of power on his heart, has to be prized away.

And this is not the first time the Lord has had to do something like this, is it? When we looked at the promises God made to David back in 2 Samuel 7 we saw these parallels with Abraham. How God chose Abraham, and entered into covenant with him, and has now done the same with David; how he promised to make a name for Abraham and has done the same for David; how an offspring of Abraham would bring blessing to the whole world, and how an offspring of David would rule the whole world.

But what did Abraham have to go through for all that to happen? He had to be willing to give up Isaac, the son born to him in his old age. He had to be willing to lose his son. Because when Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac, and then God told him to stop, God was dealing with the idolatry of Isaac in Abraham’s heart. And now God is dealing with the idolatry of power in David’s.

In his commentary on this passage, Eugene Peterson describes how, in David’s adultery with Bathsheba, David has been ‘all but oblivious to God, attempting to assert his own mastery of life, and in which he has been cruelly indifferent to the people around him: Bathsheba was an object; Uriah an obstruction; Joab a tool.’ But here, as David’s on the carpet, he’s broken, he’s coming face to face with the fact that neither he, nor the power he craved, is God.

Now, when you and I face suffering or difficulties, we rarely get the kind of answers into the question ‘why?’ that we see here, do we? But difficulties and trials sure have this power to show us what we most love, or are afraid of losing, don’t they? Those times when we’re knocked down have the power to expose those things we get our significance or our security from, what really has our heart. Because when we’re at risk of losing something, or have lost it, we discover just how much we loved it – and sometimes it’s too much. And for Abraham that was Isaac; for David it’s power.

But the question is, when we are knocked down – whether we’ve brought it on ourselves, or God is dealing with stuff in our hearts, or it’s simply a product of the brokenness of our world, how do you get back up?

David Standing Up

Despite David fasting and praying for a week, the child dies, and David’s household are worried. Verse 18, “How can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm.” I mean, if his son being unwell was enough to floor him, what impact will his death have?

But David on the carpet hasn't been David mourning, it's been David praying. And whilst David's been praying he's learned two things. Two things that can help all of us stand again.

Firstly, he learns that **the Lord is sovereign and I can trust him**. Now, I grew up sailing, and when I was a boy we used to sail from a place called Bosham harbour. And Bosham is famous for being the place where King Canute tried to turn back the waves. You see, Canute was surrounded by fawning courtiers who told him, 'Canute, you're so great! There's no king like you Canute!' And one day, Canute had had enough, and at low tide he marched his court down to the water's edge, and sat on a chair on the beach as the tide began to turn, and commanded the waves to go back. Which they didn't. So with the water coming around his ankles, he moved the chair further up the beach and commanded them again, but still the tide wouldn't obey him. Until finally, knee deep in water, Canute turned to his court and said, 'Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings.' And, apparently, he picked up his chair, walked back up the beach, and went and hung his gold crown on a crucifix and never wore it again.

But that's the lesson David needed. And David lying prostrate in the house of God is David in the presence of one far greater than himself. It's David powerless in the hands of another.

Look what he says when he's told of his son's death, v23, "Can I bring him back again?" Now last week we saw how David's sin consisted of him issuing one command after another: he sent for Bathsheba; he brought Uriah back from battle, and then sent him to his death. But in the death of his son David learns he doesn't have the ultimate power over life and death. That there's another King who doesn't do just whatever David tells him. And so suffering humbles David, the proud man of power.

But David also knows that whilst God does have ultimate power, he doesn't use power like David does. If he did, he wouldn't be praying to him when Nathan has already told him the child will die. Instead, David tells his household that he fasted and wept, v22, "For I said, 'Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me.'" You see, David has also learned that whilst God is sovereign, he is also good, and he knows he can trust him to always do what's right.

Francis Thompson was an English poet living in Victorian London. His life was trashed by addiction to opioids. And in his poem, *The Hound of Heaven*, he describes running away from God, but all the time God is patiently, lovingly, relentlessly pursuing him. And in the closing stanzas Thompson writes, 'Is my gloom, after all, shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?' All along he thought the suffering of his life was God out to get him, but he discovered it was God's loving hand drawing him back.

And when we face suffering, even suffering that humbles us, the knowledge that God is in control, that he's pursuing us, that he doesn't allow anything to happen to us without a loving fatherly purpose, isn't some heavy hand keeping us down. It's the hand that lifts us up.

But the second thing David learnt was that he had **a future hope**. Look at v18: 'On the seventh day the child died.' The day before he would have been circumcised. Now, does that mean, as one commentator says, that this child is forever excluded from God's covenant people? And the answer's 'no'. You see, remember how in chapter 7 God promised David rest from his enemies, a rest that would be a foretaste of the far deeper and more satisfying rest he offers all of us from all our striving to find meaning and significance apart from him.

And David's son dies on the seventh day – the day of rest, and he enters that rest, and David knows it. Verse 23, "Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." You see, in Psalm 16, David wrote, 'My heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption' (Ps 16:9-10). And David knows that neither suffering or death will have the last word – in his life, or his son's. That one day they will be reunited.

And it was that hope that helped him stand again. And if David had it, how much more do we? You see, Abraham and David aren't the only fathers who faced the loss of a son. At the cross, God the Father experienced the ultimate loss in the death of his Son. A loss that tells us just how much he loved his Son and just how much he loves us – as Jesus took the punishment, the suffering, that we deserve, so that we never have to. And that loss tells us that whatever we might lose, there is a love that picks us up and stands us on our feet. And in rising from the dead, Jesus tells us, more clearly than David ever understood, that suffering and death don't have the last word – however loud their words might be.

David Back in the Fight

And remarkably David does three things once he's back on his feet. Firstly, **he worships**. Verse 20, 'David arose from the earth... went into the house of the Lord and worshipped.' David the worshipper returns to worship. Because we always worship, we always sacrifice for, we always shape our lives around that which we think will give us the most joy, or the greatest security, or the deepest sense of significance. And for however long, that's been power for David. But now it's God. So he worships. And when you've been learnt through suffering that God is sovereign and yet you can trust him, and that your future hope lies in him, you can't help but worship.

Secondly David **comforts**. Verse 24, 'Then David comforted his wife, Bathsheba.' And there's something about going through suffering, and God dealing with your heart in it, that leaves you uniquely qualified to help others. Because you know the comfort of God, personally.

In David's great confession in Psalm 51 he prays, 'Restore to me the joy of your salvation... then I will teach transgressors your ways.' And it is precisely when we've allowed God to do his work in us, when we've genuinely repented where that's needed, and allowed him to prize the idols from our hearts, that we can be tools in his hand for good.

And Bathsheba conceives and gives birth to Solomon, whose name means *the Lord's peace*. And because David's heart has been stilled he can help bring peace to his wife. But God had to take him through suffering to get him there. And it's through this son, Solomon, that Christ will come, the ultimate prince of peace. So no wonder Nathan tells

him, call him Jedidiah – which means Beloved of the Lord. Because even in the wreckage of sin, God’s working something greater than suffering.

But thirdly, and finally, David gets **back to service**. This account of David’s sin begins with David going AWOL, lying on his sun-lounger on the rooftop whilst Joab and the soldiers are away fighting. But it ends with Joab calling on David to come join the battle: v27-28, “I have fought against [the city of] Rabbah... Gather the rest of the people... encamp against the city and take it.” And this time David goes, and once more takes up his responsibilities as king.

You see, suffering and trials can end up leaving you sidelined for the rest of your life, can’t they? Think God is punishing you, and if you think you don’t deserve it, you’ll be sidelined by bitterness; or if you think you do deserve it, you’ll be sidelined by morbid introspection or crushing guilt. But know that because of Jesus you are beloved by God; that he is in absolute control, and you can trust him, no matter how bad things seem; and that Jesus has won for you an everlasting hope, then you’ll get back up, you’ll worship, you’ll comfort others and you’ll go out and serve for the glory of God.