

2 Samuel 20 - A gory look at the horror of sin

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Preacher: Steve Palframan

[0 : 00] If you're visiting with us this morning, let me tell you that we have been working our way through the book of 2 Samuel together on Sunday mornings, and we have arrived at chapter 20.

The story so far, in very, very brief terms, the story of 2 Samuel is the story of King David, Israel's most famous king. And in recent times, he has had a difficult time because his eldest son Absalom had rebelled against him, had turned him out of his palace, turned him out of Jerusalem, and taken the kingdom from him.

Then what we found is that actually David and his army were able to conquer Absalom and his army. Absalom got caught in a tree by his hair and dangled there and was killed, and David recovered the kingdom and went back to Jerusalem.

And that's where we left it, and now we're picking it up in chapter 20. So let me read 2 Samuel chapter 20 to you. Now, a troublemaker named Sheba, the son of Bichri, a Benjamite, happened to be there.

He sounded the trumpet and shouted, We have no share in David, no part in Jesse's son, every man to his tent, Israel. So all the men of Israel deserted David to follow Sheba, son of Bichri.

[1 : 19] But the men of Judah stayed by their king all the way from the Jordan to Jerusalem. When David returned to his palace in Jerusalem, he took the ten concubines he had left to take care of the palace and put them in a house under guard.

He provided for them, but had no sexual relations with them. They were kept in confinement till the day of their death, living as widows. Then the king said to Amasa, Summon the men of Judah and come to me within three days.

Be here yourself. But when Amasa went to summon Judah, he took longer than the time the king had set for him. David said to Abishai, Now Sheba, son of Bichri, will do us more harm than Absalom did.

Take your master's men and pursue him, or he'll find fortified cities and escape from us. So Joab's men and the Kerethites and the Pelethites and all the mighty warriors went out under the command of Abishai.

They marched out from Jerusalem to pursue Sheba, son of Bichri. While they were at the great rock in Gibeon, Amasa came to meet them.

[2 : 24] Joab was wearing his military tunic and strapped over it at his waist was a belt with a dagger in its sheath. He stepped forward. It dropped out of its sheath.

Joab said to Amasa, How are you, my brother? Then Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him. Amasa was not on his guard against the dagger in Joab's hand, and Joab plunged it into his belly and his intestines spilled out on the ground.

Without being stabbed again, Amasa died. Then Joab and his brother Abishai pursued Sheba, son of Bichri. One of Joab's men stood besides Amasa and said, Whoever favours Joab and whoever is for David, let him follow Joab.

Amasa lay wallowing in his blood in the middle of the road, and the man saw that all the troops came to a halt there. When he realised that everyone who came up to Amasa stopped, he dragged him from the road into a field and threw a garment over him.

After Amasa had been removed from the road, everyone went on with Joab to pursue Sheba, son of Bichri. Now Sheba passed through all the tribes of Israel to Abel Beth Malach, and through the entire region of the Bichrites, who gathered together and followed him.

[3 : 44] All the troops with Joab came and besieged Sheba in Abel Beth Maka. They built a siege ramp up to the city, and they stood against the outer fortifications. While they were battering the wall to bring it down, a wise woman called from the city, Listen! Listen! Tell Joab to come here so

that I can speak to him.

He went towards her, and she asked, Are you Joab? I am, he answered. She said, Listen to what your servant has to say. I am listening, he said. She continued, Long ago, they used to say, Get your answer at Abel.

And that settled it. We are the peaceful and faithful in Israel. You are trying to destroy a city that is a mother in Israel. Why do you want to swallow up the Lord's inheritance?

Far be it from me, Joab replied. Far be it from me to swallow up or destroy. That is not the case. A man named Sheba, son of Bichri, from the hill country of Ephraim, has lifted up his hand against the king, against David.

Hand over this one man, and I will withdraw from the city. The woman said to Joab, His head will be thrown to you from the wall. Then the woman went to all the people with her wise advice, and they cut off the head of Sheba, son of Bichri, and threw it to Joab.

[5 : 02] So he sounded the trumpet, and his men dispersed from the city, each returning to his home. And Joab went back to the king in Jerusalem. Joab was over Israel's entire army.

Benaniah, son of Jehoiada, was over the Kerithites and the Pelethites. Adoniram was in charge of the forced labor. Jehoshaphat, son of Ahilud, was recorder.

Sheba was secretary. Zadok and Abitha were priests. And Ira the Jerrite was David's priest. Well, keep that passage open. Let me pray and ask for the Lord's help as we consider it together.

Lord, we pray now, acknowledging our need of you and our weakness, we pray that you might help my words this morning to be useful and effective.

We pray that you might be at work by your spirit in our hearts, that we might hear you speak to us from these ancient words. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. What I want to try and show you this morning is that the horror of Amasa's murder is right at the center of the passage.

[6 : 15] In other words, I think that the really gruesome picture of a man by the side of the road, wallowing in his blood with the intestines spilled out, is exactly what 2 Samuel, inspired by the Spirit of God, wants us to be mostly thinking about this morning.

And I want just to show you two ways that he does that for us this morning. The first one is by using some clever symmetry. Let me try and show you what I mean. If you look down at the passage, you might notice that it begins and ends with a trumpet sounding.

In verse 1, Sheba, the son of Bichri, the Benjamite, blows a trumpet. We're told that he is a worthless man. He is a troublemaker.

And he's from the same tribe as Saul. It's pretty clear that he wants nothing to do with David's kingdom. So he blows a trumpet to gather the troops for war. Then down in verse 22, at the end of the passage, Joab is also blowing a trumpet to bring the fight to an end.

By this point, Sheba's head has been thrown over the wall of the city of Abel. And so Joab's mission is completed. But the symmetry continues.

[7 : 27] Not only does the story begin and end in the same way, if you come to the next verses, to verse 3, we are told how David deals with his concubines who Absalom has defiled. David makes them live in widowhood.

I don't think we're to understand here that David is being cruel. Rather, I think we're to understand that these women are innocently caught up and damaged by all that is going on. Now, dealing with those innocent women is matched in symmetry by what goes on towards the end of the passage, that Joab's pursuit of Sheba is concluded not by him, but also by another innocent woman, the wise woman of Abel.

Sheba has fled to that city for safety, and Joab and his men are trying to pull the city down to get him out. And this wise woman calls to Joab, telling him, listen, this city that you're just about to destroy, this is a good place.

We are good people. We are faithful people. And you are destroying and swallowing up part of Israel's heritage. I'll be it for me, says Joab. All I'm after is that one guy.

She says, leave it with me. And she goes to the city and she says, if we throw this guy's head over the wall, everything will be all right. And so she does that. And then so you've got the symmetry between that woman and the innocent concubines caught up in the mess of Absalom.

[8 : 50] And she, coming further in, the symmetry continues. So then back at the beginning of the passage in verse four, you've got David telling Amasa, who he's appointed over his army to gather the troops.

He's given a deadline to do it. And verse five tells you that he tries to do it, but he can't seem to get it together. He doesn't return in the requisite three days.

And David asks Abishai in the end to gather the army. The people follow the old commander, who David has tried to sack, Joab later on in the story.

It's matched then in symmetry with Joab's success in verses 11 and 15, that he is able to gather an army where the other guy, Amasa, was not able to.

So there you go. You've got symmetry working in. And that means that right at the heart of the story, you have this really unpleasant murder of Amasa by Joab, Amasa's body wallowing in its blood.

[9 : 47] But it's not just the symmetry that makes this point. It also makes sense of why there is so much detail at this point of the story. The story really slows down as we think what we're reading is the story of another coup against David.

But it turns out that it's not really about that at all. Actually, where the story really slows down is by the great rock of Gibeon. Now, the great rock of Gibeon in verse 8 is only a few miles north of Jerusalem.

Abel, the city that they're traveling to eventually, is right up in the far north of the region. So the point the writer's making to you is, listen, they haven't got very far yet. They've only just set off. So Amasa might be late, but he's not actually that late. Not late enough to justify what happens. Next then, in a kind of weird turn of events, you get the detail of Joab's outfit.

It's Joab, we're told, is wearing a soldier's uniform, which is perhaps not that surprising given what his job is and given where he's going. But the writer wants you to know that his uniform is held together by a belt, a belt which has a sword, probably a dagger attached to it.

[10 : 50] And then you're given the detail of Joab's kind of military skill and cunning. He seems deliberately to allow the dagger to fall to the ground as he approaches Amasa.

Oh, it just fell out on the floor just in front of him. Interesting detail. He picks it up with his left hand, which again just seems a slightly pointless detail.

But in a world of right handedness, someone holding a sword in their left hand meant that they weren't going to attack you because they couldn't. But that means that Amasa is unguarded when Joab goes in for a kiss, holding his beard with his right hand and goes to kiss him and then stabs him in the stomach with his left hand and spills his intestines to the ground.

No second blow, you're told, as if you needed that detail. Amasa's guts are on the floor. He's dead, wallowing in his blood. Now, I know that that's gross. In fact, it's so gross, isn't it?

Verse 12 is so gross that people walking past get kind of distracted by Amasa. So much so that they get held up and one of Joab's men ends up pulling his body out of the way and covering him up so that people aren't distracted.

[12 : 02] But for you and I, as we read the story, what we're to notice is that the whole story is swinging on Amasa's death. Not so much, I don't think, because the writer of 2 Samuel is like some kind of horrible histories guy who thinks that these physical gruesomeness are the funny parts of history and you might be mostly interested in that.

No, the point is that you notice the wickedness of this. The writer is saying to you, listen, notice Amasa in his blood, because if you notice that and see what's going on there, you will see a portrait of the sinfulness of sin, the wickedness of wickedness.

Chadwick and Freeman, who are two scholars, have written a book on the manners and customs of the Bible. An interesting book, I am sure, but I only really looked at this bit about Joab's actions. They say this of Joab's actions, taking hold of someone's beard and kissing his cheek was customary oriental greeting. Just for the record, it's not a greeting today.

Don't do this to me at the door or to anyone else who has a beard. So taking hold of someone's beard and kissing them on the cheek was a customary oriental greeting. By so doing, Joab showed the base treachery of his heart by coming to Amasa as a friend and thus entirely concealing his murderous intent.

[13 : 25] This is the wickedness of wickedness. The wickedness is supposed to shock you. Here is not so much a gruesome murder or not just a gruesome murder, but a selfish, self-interested commander.

An army commander who is so angry at his demotion from army captain that he is willing to take matters into his own hands, literally slaughtering in cold blood. A man who is on his side, who he

pretended to be friendly with.

In other words, the horror at the center of the passage is not just the blood and guts of Amasa, but the horror of Joab's heart. The human heart, that it can be so full of its own self-importance, its own desires for glory, that it would go to such lengths of deception that we see here.

Now, I think it's probably fair to say that if Joab had read 2 Samuel, he would be quite shocked by this definition of the events. Right. I think if Joab was writing 2 Samuel chapter 20, he wouldn't focus here, would he?

I'm sure the focus would be on the way that he was able to gather the troops in a way that Amasa was not able to. I don't suppose Joab was a journaling type, right? He doesn't have that kind of aura about him, does he?

[14:40] But if he did write a journal, he'd write, dear diary, today, I smashed it. Absolutely smashed it. Amasa, worthless guy. Rubbish.

He wasn't able to gather the troops. I was. I was. I persuaded the city of Abel to throw the head of this nasty guy, Sheba, over the wall.

I absolutely killed it today. It was amazing. I think that's what he'd think. But when, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the history actually gets written, what do we find? Well, God is not so concerned with a day of victory, but a day of treachery.

And so much so that the sinfulness of Joab's heart becomes the focus of 2 Samuel 20. I think there's a metaphor, isn't there, for this in the way that Amasa's body is pulled off the road and covered up with a garment, which stops people seeing it.

It's like the definition of an inadequate cover-up of sin. You know, he, like, just drags the body out of the way and throws a coat over it, as if that covers it over. But it doesn't really, does it?

[15:40] Because the whole story is focused in on it. You can't hide the wickedness of Joab's heart by dragging the body to the side and throwing the coat over it. Now, that I suggest to you is the story, but think with me, what does it mean?

What does it mean? Why would you have a story like this in the Bible? Why is that the focus of the passage? Well, let me suggest to you that the detail of the passage is here, because the question that you and I are being posed with this morning from 2 Samuel 20 is this.

Where is your Amasa? Where is your Amasa? What is it that you or I in selfish envy have done that we've dragged off to the side of the road and thrown a blanket over it in the hope that no one will notice?

Because 2 Samuel 20 wants to say, no, let's just bring that back into focus for a moment. Let's not ignore it. Let's not think that it doesn't matter. Let's talk for an uncomfortable moment about the wickedness of sin.

You see, I think the uncomfortable truth is that for all of us, our lives are actually littered with the evidence of envy, pride and self-interest.

[16:53] And though we tell ourselves that it doesn't matter, 2 Samuel 20 wants to stop us in our tracks and say, I know you think this doesn't matter very much, but pause, will you, and think about it and think about the horror of it.

Let me try and show you how Jesus makes the same point in Mark chapter 7. You might want to turn to it in your Bibles. It will come up on the screen behind us. But Mark chapter 7, Mark chapter 7, it's on page 1010.

Let me read to you these words of Jesus from verse 14. Jesus says this, Again, Jesus called the crowd to him and said, Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.

Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. And after he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable.

Are you so dull? He asked. Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it does not go into their heart, but into their stomach and then into the body.

[18:06] And saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean. He went on, What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.

All these evils come from inside and defile a person. Now, Jesus here is talking at first to a crowd of religious Jews and their leaders, people who thought that they were winning at life, because on the

outside, as far as anyone could tell, as far as you and I could tell if we'd seen them or met them, they were good people.

They kept the rules. They looked good. But Jesus says to them in one of the most penetrating paragraphs in the New Testament, listen, on the inside, you're dirty and unclean.

And he hits them with a list of terrible things, which are not imposed on people from the outside, but come from the inside out. Just have a look at the list with me. Evil thoughts. Sexual immorality is the Bible's catch-all word for all sexual activity outside of the marriage of a man to a woman.

From pornography, lust, to adultery and casual sex. Theft, murder. Adultery, again, in case you missed it the first time around. Greed, wanting more and more.

[19 : 24] Malice, deceit or treachery. Sensuality or lewdness, as in crudeness, perverted talk, rude joking. Envy, slander, literally blasphemy. Not towards God so much here, but as words spoken with the intent to damage someone's reputation.

Pride or arrogance and foolishness. These, says Jesus, these are the motives of the human heart. These are the driving forces of our lives that flow out from us into our actions.

It's not hard, is it, if you come back to 2 Samuel 20 to see which ones of those are at play in this chapter. Murder, deceit, foolishness, pride for a start. But I want us just to zoom in on the word envy here.

The word envy in the New Testament here is literally evil eyes. In other words, envy is not so much looking at something that someone else has and saying, I want that for myself.

That is jealousy, right? Envy is different to jealousy. Envy looks at something that someone else has and says, I want to see the pain of them losing it and me gaining it.

[20 : 30] Do you understand the difference? Envy looks at the joy or the happiness that someone else is enjoying and says, I will not be happy until they are miserable.

Until they lose it and I gain it, I will not be happy. And Jesus says, incredibly, that is what the human heart is like. In its twisted sinfulness, it is persuaded that the happiness of the human heart, my happiness depends upon your unhappiness.

Happiness. That's Joab, isn't it? In 2 Samuel chapter 20. Joab, notice Joab doesn't just want to be the most important person in David's army. At no point in 2 Samuel 20 is Joab waving his hand saying, David, give me my job back.

I really want my job back. He doesn't actually care so much about getting his job back. He cares that Amasa doesn't have it. That's what he wants. He envies, he evil eyes Amasa, even to brutally killing him.

And the horror of 2 Samuel chapter 20 is the horror of human envy. The glory bloodbath that the human heart plays out. Now let me suggest as gently as I can to all of us, me included, that this is exactly how envy works today.

[21 : 45] And it's still as horrific as it ever was. Maybe you look at a friend and it's not just that you want their good looks.

It's that you are bitterly angry that they have them. Their good skin, their beautiful hair, their nice clothes, their lots of friends. Makes you angry.

Twists you up inside in a way that you can't describe, in a way that you suppress and you dare not speak of. Maybe at work, it's not just that you want to be promoted. It's not just that.

It's how dare they promote them. They don't deserve it. They're lazy good for nothing. And you won't be happy until it's taken from them. You know, it's not just that I'm heartbroken that my children and my grandchildren don't follow the Lord.

I'm resentful that their children seem to follow the Lord. They're terrible Christians. Why have they got children who want to come to church? Grandchildren who want to hear about Jesus?

[22 : 47] They don't deserve it. I think you can see this kind of envy in our culture as well, in the way that our culture views the rights of the individual. So that if there's a choice between the life that I planned, the happiness that I think I deserve, and the life of an unborn child, I will choose my happiness and not their life.

I think it's the same with the assisted suicide bill that's going to come before Parliament. It will open the door, won't it, for relatives pursuing their happiness at the expense of their relatives' lives.

My happiness at the cost of you. And 2 Samuel 20 says, listen, this kind of envy, it's a bloodbath. It's a bloodbath. And it will be.

And 2 Samuel 20 says to you and I this morning, listen, I know this is uncomfortable and I know this is gross and I know you don't want to think about it, but look, will you think about it for a moment? Will you think about the fact that your heart is full of this kind of envy?

That my heart is full of this kind of envy? Will you just for a moment not try and cover it up? Will you just have a look at what envy does to you? Will you have a look at what envy does to your culture?

[24 : 01] Will you have a think about who your amasses are? And I think perhaps the most uncomfortable thing about 2 Samuel 20 is that it does nothing to resolve it for you, does it?

It just leaves you there. If you want, you could summarise the message of 2 Samuel 20 like this. Listen, in David's kingdom, David's a brilliant king, as brilliant as he is, as much as he loves the Lord, in David's kingdom, there is blood on the floor because David, for all his brilliance, can do nothing about the human heart.

He can't. And it leaves you there. It leaves you there. There's no security, no love, no joy, no mercy, no reconciliation and forgiveness. David just can't bring it.

The wickedness of the human heart means that, well, people in his kingdom can't help but grab people by the beard and kill them, ruining the lives of 10 innocent women, turning a peaceful city into a battleground, being run by worthless traitors.

And so 2 Samuel 20 leaves us again, doesn't it, with this vision of the horror of sin and a huge void where salvation needs to be. But the brilliant truth is, and we're going to end here this morning, the brilliant truth is that the Bible doesn't leave you there.

[25 : 12] Let me tell you that there is in the Bible the story of another gruesome body at the side of a road just outside Jerusalem.

It's a body which has also been stabbed in the side where water and blood are flowing out. This time the body is hanging from a cross.

And just like with a Massa, you can look at this body and you can see the horror of sin, the horror particularly of envy. Because that body, the body of Jesus Christ, was put there as a response to a crowd who were driven by jealousy and envy.

We don't only want Jesus' popularity, we want him not to have it. And so they pin him to a cross to rob him of it.

And if 2 Samuel 20 slows down so that you get a good look at the horror of a Massa's body, well then it's fair to say that the whole Bible slows down that you might get a good look at this body on the cross.

[26 : 15] But not just and not even so much that you might see the horror of human sin, but so that incredibly you might see the wonders of salvation from that sin.

Because as Jesus dies there, hanging there, it's not just that he's taking the penalty for sin for those who would trust in him like an innocent, sacrificial lamb, although he is that.

But we are to look at his body and we are to understand this, that in his body he is taking on himself our very sinful nature described in Mark chapter 7 that we read together.

So much so that if you were a Christian this morning, what you're seeing as you look at Christ on the cross is not just the death of your Lord, although you are seeing that.

What you are seeing as well is this, the death of your sin. Your sin has through our faith union with Jesus Christ, he takes our old natures onto himself and we die with him.

[27 : 17] You see, I think what you're seeing, if you see a master's body, you see Jerob's envy. If you see Jesus' body, you see the opposite of envy.

You see, envy takes a good thing off another to try and receive it itself. Jesus' death on the cross is taking a bad thing off another to receive it for himself that we might receive his forgiveness and his blessing and his mercy.

Isn't that incredible? Listen, if you're not a Christian this morning, maybe this has been a bit shocking to you this morning. I guess that 2 Samuel 20 is perhaps not the kind of story that you expected to find in the Bible, right?

I love that about Club on a Friday night is that I think they're shocked by some of the stories in the Bible because they think the Bible's full of nice squeaky clean stories, but it's not. The horrors of human life are all here in the pages of the Bible for you to read.

But let me ask you to consider this morning if you're not a Christian that it might be true that the problems in your life are not the fault of other people, but are the things coming out of your own heart.

[28 : 27] Not imposed on you by work or home, as real as those problems might be, but the problem might be the wickedness and envy of our own hearts that we are capable of twisting into horror what has been good and given to us for our blessing.

And that the only solution for those kind of internal problems is to find someone who is able to take them out of you onto themselves and pay the penalty for them on the cross.

And that is Jesus Christ. There is nobody else. You can't go anywhere else and hear this message this morning. You will only hear it in the church of Jesus Christ.

You will only there hear of the solution for our internal problem, which we all have. And for many of us this morning, we've been Christians for a long time, but the application for us is very much the same.

Because Christian maturity, right, is not about diminishing the horror of your sin, but is about noticing it and seeing it and owning it as you also look to the one who is able to solve it and save you from it.

[29 : 37] Christian maturity grows in its view with the cross as it sees the horror of its sin was greater than it thought before and so the mercy of Jesus is greater than you thought before. So that much, as our lives and our world are very much like 2 Samuel 20, a sort of merry-go-round of unsolvable wickedness, there is still this body whose violent death tells a better story than Amasa's.

And really, the story of the Bible for you, if you're a Christian this morning and if you're not a Christian, is listen, don't just stare at Amasa. Stare at Jesus. Stare at Jesus. Let me pray and then we'll sing in response.

Just take a moment of quiet. Maybe you want to respond in your own heart. Maybe there's a prayer that you want to pray. Maybe if you've never trusted Christ, you want to do that now and turn to him. Maybe if you've been a Christian for a long time, you just want to turn to Jesus again and thank him for what he's done for you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Heavenly Father, it would be wrong for us to try to pretend that we are better than we really are or that the sins that we see in Joab's heart played out so gruesomely are really any different from the things going on in our hearts.

We might not be an Iron Age warrior, but in our own ways we see the mess that comes from our envy. Please, we pray, forgive us and show us mercy through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[31 : 42] Thank you that in him you have taken our sin to the cross and punished it and given us his righteousness. How we pray for ourselves as a church that you might help us not to downplay the seriousness of our sin but to stare it in the face whilst also rejoicing that Christ's cross pays for it all.

And so, Lord, we pray that you might make us humble, gracious, kind and loving as we reflect on the Lord Jesus who has been gracious, kind and loving to us in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.