

BIBLE BRIEFING

“Mercy College”

Second Samuel 12:15-23

Introduction

The child... *who* is born to you shall surely die.

The prophet, Nathan, did not sugar-coat God’s words. Neither did the writer of Second Samuel, who stated bluntly in verse fifteen, *the Lord struck the child*.

It’s the kind of thing we tend to shrink away from as Christians – hoping our unbelieving family and friends won’t bring it up! Yet here is God going on the record taking responsibility for the death of this infant.

It’s what C.S. Lewis once called “the problem of pain.” Why does God allow suffering? Why do bad things happen even to God’s people? Where is God when it hurts?

We need to let God’s sufferers answer those and all the related questions. For example:

1. You don’t even need to be a Christian to know about Job. God allowed the devil to kill his servants, sons, and daughters. Then God allowed him to strike Job with physical ailments. Job answered by saying, *I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, But now my eye sees You* (Job 42:5).
2. The apostle Paul pleaded with the Lord to remove from him the thorn in his flesh. God refused, saying that grace was sufficient for Paul to endure the suffering. Paul responded by saying, *Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me* (Second Corinthians 12:9).

Both these godly men concluded that their suffering brought them deeper into the presence of God.

The person to focus on tonight is not the dead infant... Or his mother, Bathsheba... Or even David. The Person to focus on is God as the God of all comfort. We'll see Him come into focus through David's experiences and example.

First, David Seeks God's Sure Mercy; then, David Receives God's Severe Mercy.

#1 Seek After God's Sure Mercy
(v15-19)

Almost everyone knows the story. David, in what we today would call a mid-life crisis, stays home from battle. He spots Bathsheba on her rooftop and doesn't turn away. He sends for her; he sleeps with her. She becomes pregnant. What to do?

In an effort to deceive her husband, Uriah, David brings him home from the front lines. David is hoping Uriah will sleep with Bathsheba and they can pass-off the child as his.

Uriah proves to be a godly man. He refuses to sleep with his wife while his fellow soldiers are warring. Even after David gets him drunk, Uriah won't fold.

David forms a fatal plan to have Uriah sent to the hottest spot of the fighting, then have the other soldiers retreat from him so he will be killed.

Tragically, the plan works! With Uriah dead, David takes Bathsheba and she becomes his wife.

David's sin was exposed when Nathan the prophet came and told him a parable. Broken and repentant, David listened as Nathan described the awful consequences of David's sin. The sword would never depart from David's house; adversity would arise from within his own house; his wives would be defiled. Most deadly, however, was that the child born to Bathsheba would die.

After hearing all of this... David immediately seeks God's mercy. He believed God would do all those things – including killing the child. But He also knew God to be merciful.

What is mercy? The armchair definition is, *God not giving you what you deserve*. Theologian Millard Erickson expands upon it, saying,

God's mercy is His tenderhearted, loving compassion for His people. It is His tenderness of heart toward the needy...

David's experiences and example give you a visual definition of God's mercy.

2 Samuel 12:15 Then Nathan departed to his house. And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became ill.

2 Samuel 12:16 David therefore pleaded with God for the child, and David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground.

Don't lose focus. Don't start thinking about the child – not yet, anyway. Look hard at David, pleading with God – even after God had spoken.

Why? **Because David knew God would show him mercy one way or another.**

1. He knew, for example, that God had once commanded Joshua to annihilate all the inhabitants of the Promised Land. But God had shown mercy to and saved Rahab, the Gentile harlot; and He had shown mercy to the Gibeonites, even though they deceived Joshua and ought to have been destroyed.
2. He also knew that Ruth was barred from Israel because she was a Moabite – yet she was his grandmother and was in the line of the Messiah.

David **fasted**. It's more of an observation than it was a spiritual discipline. By that I mean David was so intent on seeking the Lord that he simply did not eat.

Was he trying to change God's mind? Maybe. But his lying there all night, denying the needs of his flesh, show that he knew a great deal about God's heart. He knew God would show him mercy.

2 Samuel 12:17 So the elders of his house arose *and went* to him, to raise him up from the ground. But he would not, nor did he eat food with them.

People are generally well-meaning and wanting to help. David didn't need help. He needed mercy – and only God would give it. Food and fellowship; sleep and shaving; none of it was the spiritual resource he needed.

If you want to be helpful, don't try to get someone off the ground.
Encourage them to get down on the ground!

David's servants faced another crisis within the crisis:

2 Samuel 12:18 Then on the seventh day it came to pass that the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead. For they said, "Indeed, while the child was alive, we spoke to him, and he would not heed our voice. How can we tell him that the child is dead? He may do some harm!"

Even the most intense fasting and praying do not always change the situation.

Well-meaning... *but wrong again!* This, essentially, was a death notification. It should have been done promptly, and in plain language.

Look: The child was dead. David was going to find out. He ought to find out the best way possible. Their fear that David might *do some harm* was valid. Just take necessary precautions.

We cannot shield people from bad news – only deliver it with grace.

David found out the worst way possible – on his own, without anyone's comfort:

2 Samuel 12:19 When David saw that his servants were whispering, David perceived that the child was dead. Therefore David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" And they said, "He is dead."

David used plain language. As a Chaplain, I use plain language when delivering death notifications, or other serious news.

His servants weren't really serving him by trying to withhold the news. Sometimes we think we are serving others when we are really thinking about ourselves.

David sought the Lord, thinking He would show him mercy. Why didn't He?

He did! It just wasn't the mercy David was initially hoping for. It was a severe mercy – but mercy nonetheless.

#2 Receive God's Severe Mercy (v20-23)

Early in his trial, Job said something that each of us needs to take deep into our hearts:

Job 1:21 And he said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

The Lord is merciful in every case. He may let the child live, even after He decrees his death. Or God may allow the death. Either outcome is filled with, and surrounded by, His mercies. It's just that some seem more severe than others.

2 Samuel 12:20 So David arose from the ground, washed and anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he went to his own house; and when he requested, they set food before him, and he ate.

There was no bitterness in David – either for refusing to answer his prayers, or for the seemingly premature death of his child. In fact, David seemed relieved. We'll see why in a moment.

David understood God was merciful no matter what. There was therefore no reason for any further sorrow, and certainly no reason for David to be bitter or withdrawn.

2 Samuel 12:21 Then his servants said to him, "What *is* this that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child *while he was* alive, but when the child died, you arose and ate food."

These have to be the worst **servants** you could find! Here David had just suffered loss, and they were wanting him to explain why he went through it in an unusual manner.

We're glad they asked because it allowed David to say one of the greatest things in the Bible:

2 Samuel 12:22 And he said, "While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who can tell *whether* the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?'

2 Samuel 12:23 But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

The Lord gave, and the Lord had taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

The further insight is that children who die before what we would consider an age of accountability go immediately to Heaven. Only those who hold to a legalistic, rigid theology think otherwise of this passage. Believe me, there are Christians who will argue with you that David's words mean something else, or something less.

What is the biblical basis? God is merciful. It is no denial of the Gospel, or the sin nature of man, or any doctrine of Scripture, to see God's mercy in saving infants and children who – though not innocent – are not yet able to receive or reject the Gospel.

(Those of you who are not satisfied with an argument from the point of view of God's mercy: I highly recommend you search for two books by Dr. Robert Lightner, *Heaven for those Who Can't Believe* – ISBN 0-87227-035-1; or *Safe in the Arms of Jesus*, ISBN 0825431565).

What about the infant himself? J. Vernon McGee wrote a classic tract called, *Death of a Little Child*. He wrote it upon the death of his own firstborn child, Ruth Margaret McGee.

Let me quickly share just six insights, with little or no comment:

1. A brief life is not an incomplete life. Eternity should be your measuring rod, not the few decades we might live on the earth.

2. You can be assured the child is in Heaven – based on David's comments in our text.
3. Heaven will become more real to you because your dearest treasure is there.
4. There are no mistakes in God's plan.
5. You will be reunited with your child one day.
6. You can prove the reality of God's comfort and mercy.

Conclusion

Job... Paul... David... And all the other heroes and heroines of the faith experienced sufferings and tragedies. They sought God's mercy; and they always received it – even if it was severe.

So can we.

