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David and His Family Tree

Earl Henslin

WHILE LIVING AT home after his college graduation, Ron found himself obsessed with his half-sister, Marita, who was home from college for the summer. Every time Ron watched her walk through the house, his desire grew. Marita was agonizingly beautiful.

Ron felt confused and ashamed. How could he lust after his own sister? Then he began to rationalize. After all, she wasn't his full sister. He'd been a proud big brother when Marita was a little girl, but now she was a gorgeous young woman, the object of his unceasing fantasies.

One morning Ron woke up depressed and guilt-ridden, knowing his obsessive desire was wrong. But desire overcame conscience, and soon he began to justify a plan to satisfy the unrelenting lust. After all, their dad had never been faithful to his mom or Marita's mother. He'd even once had an affair with the wife of a treasured employee. Dad approached beautiful women the same way he tackled his successful business: He saw what he wanted and went after it.

So, the first time Ron found himself alone in the house with Marita, he feigned a fever and called out for her to bring him something cool to drink. Unsuspecting, Marita was genuinely concerned. She had once or twice felt uneasy recently about the way Ron had been looking at her, but she chalked it up to her imagination.

Watching from his bedroom door, Ron was mesmerized by Marita's graceful movements around the family kitchen. As soon as Marita came near Ron's bed, he grabbed her.

Ron's body was pressed against Marita's before she could recover from the shock. He was kissing her and touching her in inappropriate ways. She cried out, but no one was home to hear. Marita tried to fight, but Ron was stronger and prevailed. Ron forcefully and brutally raped his sister.

Afterward Ron looked at Marita with a mixture of guilt and growing disgust. For some reason he couldn't bear to look at her anymore. A strange contempt overtook him once his lust had been satiated. He hurriedly slipped on a pair of jeans, then he practically threw Marita out of his room and locked the door.

Outside Marita cried and screamed while pulling her ripped clothing around her as tightly as she could in a desperate, futile effort also to cover her raw, wounded heart. She felt her very soul had been torn apart, violated, ashamed, used, and ruined. She'd saved her body for the husband she'd dreamed of having someday; now that gift had been soiled forever.

Her assault was avenged, however. When word got out about what had happened, Marita's brother Andrew decided to get even. He waited for two full years in the hope that their father would confront and deal with Ron, but when his dad did nothing, Andrew tracked Ron down and, in an act of pent-up fury, viciously murdered Ron for violating their sister.

This story did not come out of my counseling experiences, nor did it come from the pages of a supermarket tabloid. It is the shocking but true story of King David's family, right out of the Bible. Ron, Marita, and Andrew are actually David's eldest son Amnon, his daughter Tamar, and a younger son, Absalom (2 Samuel 13).

The foundation for Amnon's behavior was probably laid earlier in David's affair with Bathsheba. The David and Bathsheba story is familiar to most Christians. David sees Bathsheba bathing on the roof of her home, has her brought to the palace, and sleeps with her. She becomes pregnant, and—to cover up his guilt—David secretly orders that her husband, Uriah,

be sent to the most dangerous part of the battlefield, where he is killed. Bathsheba then comes into David's household as his wife. The baby she is carrying is born and dies. We see David mourning and expressing deep grief over the loss of his son (2 Samuel 12:14–23), finally owning his part in the tragedies.

Amnon, Tamar, and Absalom were teenagers when the Bathsheba and David incident happened. They saw their father model behavior that was manipulative and treacherous: covering up his sin with Bathsheba by secretly giving the orders that led to Uriah's death. What those teenagers learned was how to cover up, how to not face issues, and how to ignore the hurt that grew out of one's actions. The stage was set for a thoroughly dysfunctional family history to unfold.

Part of the tragedy of David's family is that it never truly dealt with the incest between Amnon and Tamar. Time went by after the attack, two years in fact, and David still had taken no disciplinary action against Amnon. So Absalom took matters into his own hands. He invited his father and the family to his house for a party; the sheep shearing was over and a celebration was in order. Amnon went to his brother's house for the party—and, after Amnon had been drinking heavily, Absalom killed him. Absalom took pride in the murder, for he felt he'd finally avenged his sister's rape. But because he knew his crime would not go unpunished, he fled and was in exile from his family for three years (2 Samuel 13:23–38).

CONCEPTS THAT CAN LEAD TO HEALING

Stop and think about it. What did you learn about Absalom in Sunday school when you were growing up? Probably that Absalom was the “bad guy.” He is usually seen as the scapegoat, supposedly the only one in David's family who had problems. It is easy to dump all the problems and responsibilities of a family on a single member. Yet when we look at David's family we can see that the whole family needed to deal with a number of issues. Let's look at a few of them:

1. *Each member of the family has hurts. Each member of the family needs help.*

There is no such thing as a scapegoat.

It is easy for a family to designate one of its members the family scapegoat. In the story just told, Absalom is the obvious “black sheep” of the family.

But in reality Absalom was not the only one in the family who needed help. He just “acted out” in the most obvious ways. There was something broken in David himself that prevented him from taking appropriate steps to deal with Amnon or fully to address the damage done to Tamar. And the emotional damage to Tamar was great. After the molestation, she lived the rest of her life in desolation (2 Samuel 13:20). She never married or had children, which was, in her culture, the ultimate disgrace. The pain of Amnon’s violation devastated her whole life.

In all families each member has hurts and wounds; each member of the family needs help. Though we may consider some members of the family the scapegoats or label them the “bad guys,” in reality all members of the family share the pain and, to varying degrees, the responsibility.

This principle was first applied in the treatment of alcohol and drug addiction. If only the alcoholic is treated and no one else in the family gets help, there is a higher rate of relapse than when the whole family is involved in treatment. It takes tough work to help family members see that “scapegoating” is counterproductive and that all share the pain.

Take Mark, for example. He was an eight-year-old boy who was failing in school and constantly fighting with the other boys on the playground. As it turned out, Mark had an older brother, Simon, who was “just perfect.” He made straight As and was well liked by everyone. His “goodness” was so pronounced he held himself aloof from his little brother, whom he saw as “just a troublemaker.” Their mother also spoke of Simon as if he wore a halo and wings. Their dad, an alcoholic, was basically absent from the family, only showing up randomly and often disappointing both of his sons with numerous “no shows” on days they’d anticipated seeing him. Both boys felt the same pain, but one dealt with it by trying to be perfect, the other by acting out.

With the help of a sympathetic family counselor, Mark and Simon both began to accept and grieve the difficult truth that their dad was never going to be there for them as long as the chronic illness of alcoholism had con-

trol of his life. The mom began to see her role in playing favorites and began to drop that dysfunctional game, instead treating the boys with equal love, respect, and concern. In time, healing happened. No more labels or “scapegoats”—just a family learning to deal with reality in healthier ways.

2. As parents we do the best we know how to do.

David was furious at what Amnon did to Tamar (2 Samuel 13:21), but the Scripture does not indicate that he did anything about it. For Tamar to regain her self-respect, she needed her father to take her violation and hurt seriously and take some clear protective action. David was a godly man yet he did not know how to face pain in his family directly and deal with it in a healthy, proactive way.

When David’s son Absalom fled after killing Amnon (2 Samuel 13:38), David remained passive in addressing hurts in his family until a woman from Tekoa (2 Samuel 14:1–24) confronted David and challenged him to bring Absalom home. Absalom returned to Jerusalem, but he remained isolated from David for two full years. Moreover, the eventual contact between Absalom and his father was not initiated by David. That contact was initiated by Absalom, who created a crisis by setting Joab’s field on fire as a means of getting his dad’s attention!

Father and son did finally connect in a warm embrace (2 Samuel 14:33), but unfortunately it was a brief window of affection. Eventually, Absalom led a revolution against his own father. Whatever took place between David and Absalom was not significant or long-lasting enough to bring about permanent change in the father-son relationship.

Why didn’t David do something to resolve the family sickness? He was a great warrior and leader, adored by his people. He was talented, gifted in music and poetry. He had been successful in defending his nation. As a teenager David had kept his country safe by killing the giant warrior Goliath. Yet the truth is that with all of his confidence and spirituality, David did not know how to deal with the conflict among his children. He did not know how to handle pain in any way other than avoidance and passivity.

What we need to learn is that even though David failed his family in

this way, it doesn't mean he *wanted* to fail them: *He was doing the best he knew how to do.*

As parents we find it difficult to be and do toward our spouses and/or children what we have not experienced ourselves. In other words, our natural tendency is to repeat with our children what we experienced as kids.

So it behooves us to read, seek mentors, counselors, and wise friends, and to observe healthy families so we don't automatically repeat a destructive pattern simply because it "feels familiar."

David was most likely passing on the dysfunction he "inherited" from his family of origin to his own kids. There's an old saying that if one person heals, it heals many generations. Imagine the power you have to turn the tide of painful patterns and leave a legacy of health and wholeness for your children and generations to come.

3. Time does not "heal all wounds" when it comes to family issues.

Two brothers who had once been close went to hear their father's will read after their dad had died. To their shock, the father had left all the assets of the family business to the older brother. The younger brother received nothing. The brothers argued ferociously over the outcome of the will, but the older brother refused to share the assets that were more important to him than the relationship.

A canyon of bitterness opened between the brothers. The two brothers have children who are middle-aged. Now even these cousins share the "inheritance" of family bitterness—all because two adults could not find a way to reconcile.

That must have been what Absalom experienced during the seven years before finally having the chance to hug his father, King David, again. He had tried, in various destructive ways, to get the "I need attention!" message across. But no one detected his deeper need. As time progressed, his anger and hurt must have turned into a well of rage that overflowed in the revolution he led against his father. The decisions Absalom made led to a grisly death: Joab took three spears and thrust them through his heart (2 Samuel 18:14). He died, most likely never knowing how his father truly felt about him. It was such a needless tragedy.

Even seven years after his estrangement from Absalom, David grieved over the loss of his son. In his grief it is apparent that he loved his son deeply: “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!’” (2 Samuel 18:33)

The pain and frustration of never having experienced a warm relationship with his son must have been excruciating, a deep hurt that only intensified with time. The adage “time heals all wounds” was not true in this case, and it rarely is in life today.

4. Change that happens inside needs to translate outwardly into relational changes.

The Bible calls David a “man after [God’s own] heart” (Acts 13:22; see also 1 Samuel 13:14). His writings in the book of Psalms indicate that David was capable of deep feelings and emotions, at least when it came to his relationship to God. Moving expressions of the depth of his hurt, the grief and shame of his sin, and other emotions come leaping out of those pages.

David could work out emotionally difficult situations with God. Yet did that translate into improved relationships with his children? We have no evidence that his children knew or experienced the sensitive side of their father. Through his emotion-laden writings, we likely know more about David’s vulnerable side than Amnon, Tamar, or Absalom did.

It is confusing when a family member has a spiritual side that seems active and real, but that spirituality or religious fervor doesn’t translate into being more loving, kind, forgiving, and authentic within marital or parent/child interactions. The most effective way for us to share our faith with our kids or our friends is not to preach at them but to be Christlike to them. When our actions and words don’t jibe with our “God talk,” the stage is set for relational and spiritual dysfunction.

5. You can always start over and learn from your mistakes.

David seems to have had a different kind of relationship with his son Solomon. At the beginning of Proverbs 4 Solomon wrote, “I was a son to my

father, tender and the only son in the sight of my mother, then he taught me and said to me, ‘Let your heart hold fast my words . . . hear, my son, and accept my sayings and the years of your life will be many.’” It appears that David did a better job in sharing his faith with Solomon in a way that Solomon could hear and receive.

It is never too late to be the spouse or parent you’ve always wanted to be. I know of one woman who tried for years to be the perfect wife and mom, but in the process she came across as plastic and unreal. Then one day a crisis forced her to cross a threshold and take a hard look at herself, her childhood wounds, family patterns, and the perfect mask she’d been wearing for years. She proactively took steps to heal. She read some good books, went to a small support group, and spent a week at an intensive Christian counseling center in the mountains.

Over time, she began to relax and express herself more vulnerably. She also learned to listen to her husband and kids without lecturing or preaching or giving advice. Though her kids were now teens and young adults, they noticed the change in their mother. One day her son said, “Mom, you’ve changed. You are more real now. I just want you to know I feel closer to you now than I did all those years when I was a kid and you were trying so hard to be the perfect mom. I can be myself with you now and enjoy just hanging out.”

My friend later shared, “It was the highest compliment I’d ever received from my kids! And all because I took a good look within and allowed God to teach me how to relax in who I am and quit worrying so much about being perfect at everything.”

WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR A FAMILY TO RECOVER?

There are six steps to help an individual or family in their journey toward wholeness.

1. Be Proactive

Take action. Take a step. Get into a support group where you can gather with other people who are dealing with similar problems. Read books about recovery and healing. Form a small group with other people who

are committed to sharing honestly and openly, who are willing to support you when help is needed, and who are committed to praying for you—as you are for them. People who make big, positive changes that last are diligent and proactive with their healing.

If you respond passively in the face of difficult problems, what will be the results of that choice down the road? Consider Bill. No matter what Bill did, his wife got angry at him. He could never do enough to please her. Her moodiness was like a dark cloud over the whole family. Bill and the kids lived in a state of chronic tension, never knowing when a thunderbolt was going to strike or the next tornado might whirl through the family, leaving in its path destruction and wreckage of hearts and feelings.

When Bill began to realize that he could change only himself, he gave up trying to pacify his stormy wife. His men’s support group gave him a place where he could be open about his hurt and frustration. When his wife was depressed and moody, he didn’t try to “fix” her. He and the kids just left to go do fun things while she napped at home, depressed and angry.

Eventually, she realized that the family was going to go on without her and began to focus more on resolving her own issues. She saw the wisdom in facing the storm within herself rather than allowing depression and anger to spill out over the whole family. Thankfully, today the family no longer lives in a continuous rainy season—there are times of sunlight, soft clouds, and deep blue skies.

2. Be Prepared for This to Take Time

In today’s fast-paced world, many of us want everything to happen yesterday. But healing from wounds takes time. Some hurts, angers, and traumas will not go away immediately. A woman or man who was the victim of incest as a child must deal not only with the hurt, anger, and betrayal connected with the molestation but also must totally restructure his or her self-image. He or she needs to resolve issues of sexuality, trust, and shame—in short, relearn how to deal with life in general.

As Christians it is easy to shame ourselves for taking too much time to get over a loss. But the truth is that healing deep hurt takes time. Healing is not something that can be rushed, no matter how hard we push ourselves. Not

even our well-meaning Christian friends who chide us for taking a healthy amount of time to be okay can shorten the duration it takes to heal.

3. Absorb New Learning and Information

It is hard to know what “normal” is when you come from a dysfunctional family. If all you saw as you were growing up was fighting and chaos, how can you know how to resolve a conflict? How do you work through your anger? As a father, how do you emotionally connect with your wife and children if you never experienced sharing feelings in a healthy relationship with your own father? If all you knew as a child was sexual abuse, how can you automatically enjoy lovemaking as good and natural in marriage? If you have never seen good communication modeled, how are you supposed to model good communication with your own children and spouse?

Classes, books, call-in talk radio shows, blogs, mentors, therapists, seminars, podcasts, Scriptures, specially formulated “healing” Bible studies, weekend retreats, and 12-Step Programs/Support groups are just some of the sources people turn to when they are beginning to relearn how to deal with life and relationships in a healthy, balanced way. You might try reading some of the books listed in the appendix or start a discussion group using this book or other self-help books. There are many wonderful, twelve-week Bible studies available that focus around issues of healing from your past and moving forward in freedom. Seek out a mentor who is empathetic to your past and present but is further along in his or her journey toward wholeness.

There are other resources all around you. Ask for help. Don’t pretend to know everything. We have all learned to fake confidence, even when deep down we are scared and uncertain. Yet most times help is available for the asking.

The point is: You need to reprogram your mind with new information. That may be obvious advice, but it is a critical step in recovery.

4. Do Whatever It Takes

If you have a mountain to overcome, develop the attitude that you will make a way to do it: climbing over the mountain, tunneling through it,

walking around it, or hiring a hot air balloon to float your way over it. There is no easy way out—no magic fix. Perseverance will pay off when you set your mind toward getting emotionally well and doing all you can to help your family do the same. Remember that just one person, healed, can affect not only your own family but also the generations to come. There's no greater task to take on!

Doing what it takes means abandoning the excuses you've been using for not getting better. You can't let excuses confine you in your pain. You may need to make room in your already busy schedule for regular 12-step groups. You may need to swallow some pride and go to a trusted friend, pastor, mentor, or therapist and say, "I need help. Can you meet with me on a regular basis for awhile?"

Adopting the determination to do *whatever it takes* to recover makes all the difference between those who get better and those who give up and go back to old unhealthy ways. Passivity and inactivity will only bring you more trouble, usually in the form of prolonged agony.

5. Dump Your Shame

Often a beginning place to healing is to dump what is not working for us. Chapter 5 of this book is devoted to the subject of shame, but it bears brief mention here, too.

Family shame, cultural shame, and religious shame are emotionally deadly. Put briefly, shame is false guilt. It is the pervasive sense that "I am defective, inadequate, and worthless as a person." Shame is typically piled on us by others, not by God. It is different from normal healthy guilt that leads us to confess, repent, and make amends. Shame is insidious and feels unremovable, like a permanent part of our psyche. It takes work to move from a shame-based family system to one that respects and honors people in the family. In some cultures where shame is used to manipulate obedience even from adults, it takes time to sort out the difference between respecting elders, for example, without allowing them to rule your life. When you grow up in a culture, that culture provides the only system that you know, so it is especially tricky to see without outside help what is healthy about that culture vs. what is shame-based in it.

The route out of shame is honor, respect, and affirmation of all family members. For example, in many families and churches the only time women are honored and respected is on Mother's Day. The rest of the year, women are relegated to back-of-the-bus status in terms of honor and respect. If a child grows up never seeing his father respect, affirm, and value his mother (or vice versa), he too will devalue the other sex. In fact, most abusive men saw this attitude modeled by some other significant male mentor in their lives, usually their father.

It often takes a great deal of new information and learning before a person can get hold of the shaming experiences in his family of origin, ethnic culture, or religious background and can begin to treat himself and the people around him differently.

6. Develop a Committed and Genuine Spirituality

No authentic and long-lasting change occurs without God's help and the work of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. A committed and genuine spirituality is an essential foundation for recovery.

Let's face it: Most real change in our attitudes is the result of God's grace in our lives. But we have a responsibility to be sold out to following Him, especially during recovery. When the heat is on, as it often is when you are trying to forsake old patterns and adopt new ones, your commitment to healthy emotional choices will be truly tested. No formula for recovery is complete without God's help.

Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). To "abide in Him" means to settle down and make our home in Him, which conveys an element of love and trust that is real and natural, and also daily and consistent.

We can be honest with God, no matter how messed up our lives are. Read the psalms, and see the honesty of the emotions expressed there. Read the Gospels, and see Jesus' honest reactions to emotionally charged situations. It's often hard for those who've not had healthy, kind parents to believe that God will treat them fairly. However, God deals with all his children as a compassionate Father and a faithful friend.

HEALING AND RECOVERY

There is great hope: God desires our healing, and He is able to bring it about. That is the focus of this book.

Over the years, I've seen God make powerful use of 12-step programs as tools of healing. At first when people attend such meetings they may be unimpressed, since the gatherings are often relatively unstructured and not exactly glitzy productions. As they stay and listen, though, people begin to marvel at the honesty and the absence of judgmental attitudes in the meetings.

Many people experience for the first time the power of God's love and caring through the acceptance and honesty in a typical meeting. Tim was one such young man. His mother tried her best to get him to go to church with her, but the harder she tried, the more he resisted. Sound familiar? If you are the parent of a strong-willed teen, it probably does.

Tim finally hit rock bottom. It dawned on him that drug use was ruining his life. He'd already dropped out of high school, and he knew college would be out of the question if something didn't change. He began attending a 12-step group and through simple prayer asked God to help him to stay sober one day at a time. Amazed, Tim found that prayer helped! His sobriety, too, now allowed him to think clearly for the first time in many years.

He decided to attend a church service with his mother. During the service Tim prayed to receive the gift of grace that Christ offered. Tim first began to experience God's power through the 12-step program. God used that program to help him find a Savior. Today Tim has a deeply rooted, genuine, and committed spirituality that continues to bring wanted changes to his life.

So have hope! Emotional and relational healing is indeed available. In fact, King David's entire life was one of recovery from one terrible mistake or sin after another! And we are talking *major* stuff here: adultery, murder, blowing it as a parent. It isn't the mistakes we make that define our lives as much as the lessons we glean from those mistakes. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that, in spite of his checkered past, David is known as a man after God's heart.

Be encouraged that God is always delighted to meet you where you are, but He will never leave you there. He will work with you patiently to bring you to a better place, just as He loved and worked with David.

Questions for Reflection

1. As we can see in the lives of David's adult children, time by itself does not heal all wounds. What issues have you put off, hoping that time would change them? What relationships have you been avoiding taking steps to improve? Make a short list of the issues you might address with God's help.
2. David was honest in his relationship with God, yet he had trouble allowing those relationship skills to translate into improvements in his dealings with his children. What are some risks and steps you can take in your relationships with your children, whether they are young or adults?
3. David's life was not defined by his mistakes but rather by what he learned from his mistakes and the way he continued to get up and seek God's help and grace. Make a list of some of the sins or mistakes you have made in the past and the lessons that you learned from them and perhaps how you've applied those lessons to avoid further mistakes.