



## Sexual assault happens

***We know that sexual assault happens in the world around us. What we don't want to believe (for we find the sin repulsive and the consequences too horrible to contemplate) is that this same offence happens also in the church – and therefore conceivably even in our own homes.***

The tendency to deny that this kind of evil can happen in the church, yes, in our own homes, carries with it a couple of distinct dangers. The first is this: a parent who refuses to believe that this sort of thing can happen in the church is not alert and watchful – and so his/her children can be hurt without Dad or Mom so much as thinking that it's possible. The second is this: when evidence appears that it has happened, such a parent is neither able nor wanting to read the evidence and draw the obvious conclusion – with as result that the victim(s) in his/her family can continue to be abused and/or no help is given to the victim (and/or perpetrator).

It is for this reason that I set forth in this article the fact that sexual assaults certainly can (indeed, **do**) happen in our midst. My grounds for this claim come first of all from Scripture itself...

### **Ezekiel 22**

One can read the words God told the prophet Ezekiel to speak concerning Jerusalem at right. Ezekiel's mandate was to show *"the bloody city"* (that's Jerusalem) *"all her abominations."* In broad terms, these abominations included, as vs. 4 says, *"You have become guilty by the blood which you have shed, and have defiled yourself with the idols which you have made."* The details appear in the vss. 6-12, where the prophet describes, in the main, the sin of abusing another sexually:

Vs. 6 mentions the perpetrators; they are described as *"the princes of Israel"*, those with the power. These are no doubt the literal *"princes"* of the royal house (the descendants of David), but include also other persons who have a position of power over others. They use their position of might to *"shed blood."*

Vs. 7 mentions the victims: *"father and mother"* are humbled, demeaned; the *"stranger"* (that's the foreigner who has no legal rights in Israel) is oppressed, exploited; the *"fatherless and the widow"* (they have no defender in the person of a father or husband) are abused.

Vss. 9-11 tell us how father and mother are demeaned, how the stranger is exploited, how the fatherless and widow are abused, for I read:

*"in your midst they commit lewdness. In you (that's the city of Jerusalem, God's holy city) men uncover their fathers' nakedness; in you they violate women who are set apart during their impurity. One commits abomination with his neighbour's wife; another lewdly defiles his daughter-in-law; and another in you violates his sister, his father's daughter."*

These are sins against the seventh commandment, including the sin of sexual assault. Father and mother are humbled in as much as one uncovers father's nakedness, i.e., one fools around with Dad's and Mom's children. Nor is it just the teenagers who, with a sense of exploration, fool around with each other; in Jerusalem father's laid hands on the daughter-in-law, men molested the neighbour's wife. In a word: sexual abuse. It's called here *"shedding blood"*, for that's what preying on a weaker person comes down to; it's to kill something in that victim *"shedding blood"*. That is why in vs 12 the sins of sexual abuse related in the vss. 6-11 are described with that phrase *"shed blood"*. And bribes are paid to silence the victims... Truly, the holy city was a *"bloody city"* – because of its sins against the seventh commandment.

We need to understand that the people of Jerusalem were God's children by covenant just as we are, and those people had all the promises that we also have. Yet they gave themselves to sins of sexual perversion, including that those with power in their midst preyed on the weak – abuse. If this evil could happen amongst the children of God of the Old Testament, it can happen also amongst the children of God of the New Testament.

### **Romans 3**

The apostle Paul describes the human race as being able to perform acts of all sorts of indecency and hurt. Says Paul of men and women, of boys and girls:

*"Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
Destruction and misery are in their ways;  
And the way of peace they have not known" (vs. 15f).*

Notice how parallel the choice of words here runs with the vocabulary of Ezekiel 22. Here, as in that passage, is reference to shedding blood..., and abusing another sexually distinctly does involve a shedding of blood – something is broken in the victim, yes, the abuse can even lead to such despair that the victim commits suicide. The passage also speaks of *"destruction and misery"*, and again, abuse distinctly leads to untold misery. The apostle Paul would have us know that such behaviour is 'typically human', and certainly not limited to the unregenerate!

### **1 Thessalonians 4**

The same apostle wrote a letter addressed to *"the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Thessalonians 1:1). His addressees, then, were people bought by the blood of the Saviour. In fact, these Christians of Thessalonica receive a compliment from Paul when he writes concerning them that

*'We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.'*

(1 Thessalonians 1:2-4)

Yet to these same elect and mature Christians, Paul directed the following words in chapter 4, words that speak very distinctly about sins of a sexual nature. I quote: *"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God."*

The word 'vessel' here is a reference to one's sexual organ. What, now, is the apostle's point? This: *"that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter."*

You see: Paul did not consider the saints of Thessalonica to be above sins of sex, not even such revolting sins as incest or child abuse; *"no one should"* use sex to *"take advantage of and defraud"* another. If the saints of Thessalonica were not above this sort of sin, the saints of Kelmscott or Albany or Legana cannot be either.

### **Facts of life**

Beside these evidences from Scripture, the hard and tragic realities of daily life are damning in their testimony. In the 11 years that I have served as minister in the Metro area, I have come into contact with far too many persons who have, at some time in their lives, been sexually abused. And let no one think that the perpetrators of the abuse are invariably persons from outside the church. Rather, the persons who committed the abuse have largely been members of the church – parents, brothers, family friends of the victim. Though it grieves me to do so, I must testify that this sort of evil is happening even today. No, I do not write this because I wish to dramatise. I write this simply because each of us needs to be alert that persons in our midst are using their "power" to take advantage of the weak..., be it their daughter or their son, be it their sister or a niece or a child

across the road... It happens by men and by women, by fathers and by mothers, it happens also by teenagers who expose themselves to younger siblings or compel another to touch them. And it does not necessarily occur only in somebody else's home.

Let no one consider sins of sexual abuse to be foreign to the church, or even to your own home. To think differently is to close your eyes to the realities of this broken life, and so to make your home, your children, a vulnerable target to sexual abuse.

Let no one be so naive as to assume that your own loved ones would never be victims of abuse **or be perpetrators of abuse**. In fact, if God would not hold on to me and to you, you and I both would use our positions of power to abuse the weak in our midst.

Let no one look down on the brother or sister who has become guilty of committing an assault on a weaker person – irrespective of the perpetrator's or the victim's age. Let it be fixed in our minds: the perpetrator of such a crime is not a worse sinner than you or I – for God hates all sin, and the wages of every sin is the same: death. Instead, *"let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall"* (1 Corinthians 10:12).

### **Purpose of sex**

The Lord God created sex and reserved sex for marriage, and for marriage alone. Its function is to communicate love and devotion not to self, but to the spouse. The Song of Solomon paints in such glowing terms the beauty and the pleasures God has built into the gift of sex when it receives a place in the context for which God intended it.

That is also why the Lord warns His people time and time again throughout the pages of both Old and New Testament not to use this gift outside of marriage (nor, for that matter, to use it selfishly within marriage); to do so is to destroy, to make cheap, what God intended to be so enriching and endearing. To use God's gifts in a manner different from what God intended is always, **always** sin.

### **Have dominion**

God created the human race to have dominion over all created things (Genesis 1:28). That includes the body. It was never the will of God that sex should rule man; it was rather the will of God that man should rule sex, that each person should control his or her sexual urges, should have dominion over the appetite God created in us. But when one lets that sexual drive determine the fantasies of the mind, let alone the behaviour of the hand (or the rest of the body), that person becomes a slave to sex. And slavery is always, **always** cruel. Consider how much anguish and frustration and eventually hatred was caught up inside Amnon because he wanted so much to release his sexual drive upon his sister. Not for nothing does Proverbs 7 describe the destruction and the misery that characterise the person who has let himself or herself be driven by sex in terms of having an arrow in the liver (vs. 23). To let sex rule you is to subject yourself to a most cruel and hard master.

### **"Uncover the nakedness"**

To the people God redeemed from slavery in Egypt, the Lord said in very categorical terms that His people were simply not to *"uncover the nakedness of"* a near of kin (Leviticus 18). The phrase *"uncover the nakedness"* means precisely what it says. In the context of the passage of Scripture where the phrase is found, the phrase simply means that the bodies of those with you in your house are not for you to observe or to touch, unless God has joined you to that person in holy wedlock.

### **The widow and the fatherless**

Time and time and time again the Lord impressed it upon His redeemed people that they were under no circumstance to take advantage of the weak in their midst, or those unable to defend themselves. I read, for example, in Exodus 22:

*"You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless" (vss. 22ff).*

Both the widow and the fatherless child were persons in Israel who were not able to defend themselves. That is: it was commonly for the husband and the father to protect the persons in his care – his family. So, if your husband or father died, you were vulnerable – you no longer had a breadwinner in the house, and Israel's society did not have the social securities we're used to. Consequently, given the sinfulness of every human heart, it is not difficult to imagine that a neighbour would take advantage of the vulnerable widow and seek to satisfy his appetite upon her or upon her children – how?? by threats of physical violence or by making sure she ends up in debt to him, etc. And woe be to her if she speaks out...

We understand, though, that the principle of passages as Exodus 22 is equally true of other situations. What if there is a family whose father is absent from home? The woman is not a widow, and the children are not fatherless, and yet they are vulnerable to the approaches of a hungry neighbour. Or what if husband and father is at home, but is not adequately alert to the power his neighbour is exercising over his wife or children so that children are coerced to supply sexual favours to the neighbour?? Or what if husband or father is so driven by sex himself that he demands favours from his own daughters??? Those daughters have no protection, then, and are to that degree fatherless...

Listen now to God's message in the face of abusing the widow and the fatherless:

*"If you afflict them in **any way**, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless" (vss. 22ff).*

As it turns out, the passage considered last time from Ezekiel 22 contains the fulfilment of this promise in Exodus 22. Shortly after Ezekiel spoke his words, the city of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and its inhabitants were cruelly raped and abused and dragged into exile.

In New Testament vocabulary: *"Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites ... will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9f).*

When our Lord, then, on Mt Sinai told His people not to *"commit adultery"*, matters of incest and sexual abuse were distinctly part of God's command. **"All unchastity is cursed by God,"** we confess in our Catechism, and so it is for us to *"detest it from the heart and live chaste and disciplined lives, both within and outside of holy marriage"* (LD 41). To the men and fathers, to the women and mothers, yes, and to the unmarried and the teenagers also, God speaks in clear language: He does not tolerate that any of us use our power – whether it be physical power or psychological power or parental power – to force a weaker person (be it in the family or elsewhere) to humiliate herself in order to satisfy our sexual urges. On such conduct lies God's curse.

That in turn means, where one has become guilty of assaulting another, that there is room only for **repentance**. God is a righteous God. So His promises concerning curse shall certainly come to pass no matter how much we try to cover up our wrongs. Before God every secret is known. And His justice shall prevail.

But to those who repent of sins of abusing another, God is also merciful, very merciful...

God in heaven sent His only Son into a world in which – He knew it! – **were people ensnared by** any and every sin imaginable – including slavery to their sexual drives. He sent His Son not for so-called 'decent' people only, but for all manner of men, and women, and children – including pedophiles, child molesters, adulterers, etc.

So it is that the Corinthian saints could be reminded of what they used to be: fornicators and idolaters and adulterers and homosexuals and sodomites, etc. *"Such,"* says Paul, **"were some of you"** (1 Corinthians 6:11). *"But,"* he adds, *"you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."* These sinners of Corinth,

then, who once gave themselves freely to every sexual sin imaginable, **were claimed by God as His in Jesus Christ, were justified before God through the blood of His Son so that their sins of adultery were washed away!**

This is a reality true equally for all who repent of sin: there is full and free forgiveness, no matter what the sin was! Sexual assault hurts the victim(s) so incredibly much, and scars them for life, yes, can affect even subsequent generations. Yet God says: there is forgiveness for all sins; none is too evil to be washed away! Very much on purpose did God give up His only Son also for the salvation of those ensnared by sins of adultery including child abuse.

### **Confess to Christ**

Since that is the gospel of Jesus Christ, let everyone guilty of a sin of sexual assault confess that sin before God in repentance – and so receive the forgiveness God graciously promises. I grant: to get any sin, and especially **this** sin, over one's lips is a struggle. It requires much in terms of self-denial; it's so humbling. Nevertheless, Jesus' words remain true:

*"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

(Matthew 11:28-30)

That weight of guilt on account of past sin is a heavy burden, and that's how we experience it: under its load we *"labor and are heavy laden."* But, the Lord says: *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* Sure, to come to Jesus with a confession like this is a yoke of its own, and submitting to the discipline of the Saviour brings its own burden. But, Jesus adds, *"My yoke is easy and My burden is light."* Compared to the weight of the burden of the guilty conscience, compared to the weight of God's heavy hand pressing down upon us, the yoke of Jesus is light; after all, with Him is forgiveness.

Hence the plea, yes, the command of the Lord: *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden."* Be rid of that sin that eats away at you, that sin that brings God's curse upon you and yours; be rid of it by coming to the Saviour in repentance of past transgression, no matter how long ago. And the promise of the Lord stands firm: *"I **will** give you rest."* For where the Son of God has paid for sin, there is no longer any condemnation from God – at all!!

Then yes, one may need to suffer the consequences of one's sins, but where there is forgiveness these consequences are not a punishment; they are instead opportunities for greater service in God's kingdom.

### **Confess to the victim**

And what of those who were hurt by your sins? In Christian love, go and be reconciled to those whom you have hurt – be that a daughter or a son, a sister or a neighbour. Whether the hurt was committed three months ago or three decades makes no difference – be reconciled! And why? Simply because it's God's express command.

James writes in so many words: *"Confess your trespasses to one another"* (James 5:16). He writes that in a context where the sins of the past have weighed upon a person so much that he loses his health. The guilty conscience, the secret burden, can take the spring out of one's step, can take the appetite for food away, can take the pleasure out of life. That shows. Go, then, confess your sins, make good with the victim(s), seek their forgiveness. And again: don't fear the consequences; the punishment for your sins Christ has already borne, and the consequences you may need to face are opportunities for greater service in God's kingdom.

Besides, how many victims are being eaten away inside with a crushing sense of being dirty, of having been used, and so loathe themselves? And yes, this is the common result of having been abused! Is Christian love not that you go and help that person carry that burden – especially if you were responsible for laying that burden on the person to begin with?? Is Christian love not that you

do what you can to remove that burden, apologise for wrongs done? If Christ has taken your burden away, should you not do what you can to take away the burden you laid on the other??

## **A word to victims**

For the victim, too, the Lord has a message, a gospel. The gospel for the victim is, on the surface, easy and straight forward. But to apply this gospel and be comforted is a daily struggle.

The gospel is this: though you may have been abused, you are and you remain **loved** by a sovereign and gracious God. He has claimed you as His in His covenant of grace, and He has promised to care for you well, yes, to turn to your benefit whatever adversity He sends you in this life of sorrow.

Yes, I word it this way on purpose. The adversity is sent by God. Let us make no mistake: though the perpetrator distinctly did wrong, it was the same God who gave His Son for our salvation who let such hurt come into your life – this God is sovereign. And this God, almighty and wise that He is, makes no mistakes; He knows exactly why He does with you what He's permitted to happen.

Very true: we don't understand why the Lord takes us down such difficult roads in life; we'd so much prefer to be without the valleys, the despair that invariably seems to follow being abused. But: if the Lord loved you enough to send His Son to ransom you from Satan's power and He has; He told you that in your baptism!, then you simply are safe in His hands – no matter the hurt and the betrayal you feel. Indeed, even the hurt you've experienced from those who exercise power over you can in the long run only serve to further God's kingdom, and your salvation.

I realise full well that this is a truth one needs to accept every day anew, and that's a **battle**; Satan would love to see that victims remain caught in feelings of being dirty and worthless. Daily, then, we need the grace of God to cling to His promise that yes, we are loved, dearly loved by the God who sent His Son for us. **And that grace He does give!**

I understand so little of it, and I certainly don't experience it the way I'd like. But that's OK: God has said, and that's why I'm persuaded *"that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38), yea, not even *"tribulation, or distress..., or nakedness"* (vs 35).

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