

Monster or Messiah

If there was ever a potion that could turn a man into a monster it is surely unforgiveness. Beginning with the pain of a real or perceived wrong, it unleashes sinful hatred from our fallen natures and foments hideous imaginations in our minds and hearts. It is the front line of an enormous battle in our heart for it seeks to annihilate loving trust in God and inflict an amplified vengeful wound in someone else.

Unforgiveness puts distance so to speak between us and God and without His help, it can stick to our souls like hot tar. I've seen it destroy very godly people, marriages, missionaries, churches...you've seen that too, haven't you. It tests what we believe, what we really believe...

His name was Ahithophel. It means something like, "my kinsman is a fool" or "unsavory relative". He had power and great prestige in the court of David. How he came to such a position is not clear but many scholars attribute the following passages to his relationship with the king:

"Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me."

Psa 41:9

"For it is not an enemy who reproaches me; then I could bear it. Nor is it one who hates me who has exalted himself against me; then I could hide from him. But it was you, a man my equal, my companion and my acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked to the house of God in the throng."

Psa 55:12-14

Yes, Ahithophel turned on David. At one point, his counsel had been as if he were the very oracle of God. In listing the most senior members of David's court, the scripture places him very prominently (see 1 Chron 27:33). Few if any enjoyed a greater or more trusting relationship with the king.

But all that went sour. Acidic. You see, Ahithophel was wronged by David. Someone he dearly loved was taken advantage of, and another he cared about was murdered by the king. I understand this to some degree. When someone did that to me, I also was incensed. Hateful, vengeful imaginations played over and over in my own mind. I related to Ahithophel's feelings and some of you may as well. He hated David as passionately, or more so, than he ever loved him. Why?

Bathsheba. Most of you know the story of David's adulterous affair with her, (see 2 Sam 11:2-5) but what you may not have known is that her grandfather was Ahithophel. Eliam, her father, was one of the king's mighty men. (2 Sam 23:34, 2 Sam 15:12) When David forced himself upon her and sent her husband, Uriah, to his death, he didn't just ruin his own life and his own family but he effectively destroyed much of Ahithophel's as well. And his cover up only made things worse.

When he was finally confronted about it by the prophet Nathan, he repented. Perhaps this is when Ahithophel found out the truth or perhaps earlier. Whatever the case, he refused to believe or accept David's repentance and continued to seek revenge. It may be that David never acknowledged his sin to his counselor for Psa 51:4, in recording

his prayer about this to God, says, *"Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done [this] evil in thy sight."* Whether that be the case or not, their relationship, once beautiful, became a bitter enmity.

Later, when David's son Absalom fomented a rebellion against him, Ahithophel joined with the would-be king. (2 Sam 15:12) Upon entering the vacated city of Jerusalem, the counselor advised Absalom to have sexual relations with all the concubines of David who had been left behind to care for the house. Not only this, but he was advised to do it in full view of the people of Israel.

Meanwhile Absalom and all the people, the men of Israel, came to Jerusalem; and Ahithophel was with him... Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, "Give advice as to what we should do."

And Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Go in to your father's concubines, whom he has left to keep the house; and all Israel will hear that you are abhorred by your father. Then the hands of all who are with you will be strong." So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the top of the house, and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel.

Now the advice of Ahithophel, which he gave in those days, was as if one had inquired at the oracle of God. So was all the advice of Ahithophel both with David and with Absalom. (2 Sam 16:15, 20-23)

Can you see how his counsel was intended to hit back at David in the same way his family was hurt? Only note that it was magnified ten fold and done in public. This is the way of the vengeful heart, one that is filled with unforgiveness. 'You hit me once, I'll hit you back ten times!'

But it didn't stop there for such a heart is rarely satisfied. *Moreover Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Now let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue David tonight. I will come upon him while he is weary and weak, and make him afraid. And all the people who are with him will flee, and I will strike only the king. Then I will bring back all the people to you. When all return except the man whom you seek, all the people will be at peace."* (2 Sam 17:1-4) You see, this is why John said that the hateful heart is one full of murder. (See 1 John 3:15)

Now, ultimately, Ahithophel's counsel was not taken, and it so drastically affected him that he road home, set his affairs in order and hanged himself. Can the lesson be any more obvious? Can it be any more poignant? Unforgiveness not only seeks to take vengeance on others but in the end, it kills you as well. The only other person to hang himself in the Bible was Judas Iscariot. It is a traitorous emotion. It will suffocate your soul.

It made Ahithophel a monster.

But the reverse is also true. Crying out for mercy, he shuffled frantically in the deep pit below his hateful brothers. It was no use trying to climb out for they were talking about killing him. He continued to cry but they ignored him. Finally, a rope was let down and he found himself sold as a slave to a caravan of traders headed south.

Years later, after faithfully serving the household of a senior military officer, he was falsely accused of gross misconduct and was put in

prison – again in a pit so to speak. Nevertheless, he faithfully served the other inmates. When the opportunity came and he flirted with vindication, he was left to serve two more years in the pit.

You all know the story of Joseph in Egypt. It may have been 14 – 16 years that he dealt with the harsh consequences of his brothers' betrayal. But then came his exaltation – from pit to Prime Minister in a day. Yet his past was so painful that he praised God for helping him forget it. He even named his first son as a testament to that fact. His life had been a long series of betrayals but through it all he kept his heart humble before God.

Nine years later, he had a chance to 'get even' for some of it. *Now Joseph was governor over the land; and it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the earth. Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he acted as a stranger to them and spoke roughly to them. Then he said to them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan to buy food." So Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.* (Gen 42:6-8)

Joseph feigned a harshness in order to test the hearts of his brothers but treated them generously. When his brother Judah, some time later finally showed that they were sincerely concerned for the welfare of their father and offered himself as the Prime Minister's slave instead of his little brother Benjamin, "... Joseph could not restrain himself before all

those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Make everyone go out from me!" So no one stood with him while Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard it.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph; does my father still live?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed in his presence. And Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come near to me." So they came near. Then he said: "I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." (Gen 45:1-5)

Shortly thereafter, the family was reunited and for seventeen more years they dwelt in the land of Goshen under Joseph's authority and graciousness. Then Jacob, their father, died.

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him." So they sent messengers to Joseph, saying, "Before your father died he commanded, saying, 'Thus you shall say to Joseph: "I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you."' Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, "Behold, we are your servants."

Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil

against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Gen 50:15-21)

For some 40 years, the older brothers had lived with the guilt of their betrayal. In considering the passage above, several questions arise:

- What was their expectation? They anticipated that with Jacob gone Joseph would reveal his hatred and repay them for the evil they had done to him.
- What was the quality of their repentance? They never express repentance or sorrow of heart but rather a fear of retribution first from God (in an earlier chapter) and then from Joseph.
- What was the nature of their confession? They claimed the request for forgiveness came from Jacob and were quick to position themselves as the servants of the God of Jacob. (Very transparent, huh?)
- What was Joseph's response? He wept.
- What was Joseph's perspective? God. Regardless of their purposes, God had His own and that is what Joseph kept in front of him.
- What was Joseph's counsel? "Do not be afraid." He comforted and spoke kindly to them.
- What was Joseph's promise? "I will take care of you." The opposite of the expected retribution.

Regardless of the brothers' lack of sincere repentance, Joseph had

forgiven them long ago because his eyes were on heaven, on the heavenly Father. He understood, probably after much prayer and weeping, that the betrayals were just the beginning of a glorious plan.

The forgiveness in his heart made Joseph a messiah, a savior to his family and a type of Jesus Christ, our true Messiah who likewise prayed as He hung on the cross, "Father, forgive them..."

The same choice is presented to each of us at some time or another. Monster or messiah – one who destroys or one who delivers. "At last I understood: in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God's hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy."- P. Yancy

"We must forgive those who have hurt us because God commands it, because our own forgiveness hinges on it, but also because it is the best thing for us. When we refuse to forgive, the bitterness grows like a cancer within us and it eats away at us, causing stress and illness and great lack of joy. The only therapy for this cancer is the surgery of forgiveness. When we refuse to forgive, we allow the sin that was committed against us to hurt us twice: once when we were first sinned against, and again by keeping us from receiving God's forgiveness. We need to stop the pain and forgive." – M. Wilkins