

## Rabbah Honor

“Honor cultures probably rely too much on shame, but our modern alternative is an epidemic of shamelessness.”

— Tamler Sommers

I was assigned to read a thick commentary for a class on 1 Peter. Have you ever read a commentary straight through? They are helpful as a reference resource. They are bit thick just to read. But that was the assignment. Then there was one more step after the reading was finished. We had to sign an honor statement. I have seen these before but this one was detailed. It gave three options.

**Read in Detail** – *reading thoroughly every portion of the reading assignment, reading every page in detail. Earns 100%*

**Read** – *reading a major portion of each page, but not every word. Earns 75%*

**Skimmed** – *going through each page noting the principle concepts so that you can give a brief summary of what the topic was about. Earns 50%*

Before being prompted to sign the statement I read these words, “Turning in this report means that you agree to the following statement: **On my honor, I promise to maintain the highest standards of honesty, integrity, and personal responsibility on this assignment.**”

The appeal to honor is motivating. If a student was comfortable with stretching the truth, those words made it far less comfortable. Maintaining honor should cause us to pause. It should weigh on our minds.

The weight of honor is felt less in an American culture than in the many cultures throughout history that have been shaped by honor and shame. As the west values individuality and freedom much of the world is motivated by maintaining honor. In these cultures, social shame is worse than physical death. Every effort is made to bring honor on a parent, a family, or a country. Incredible sacrifices and efforts are made to maintain honor and avoid shame in the eyes of society. There is something honorable about it. It can also be destructive when honoring people requires us to harm ourselves.

The purest appeal to honor is to live in a way that honors God. This is the kind of honor that does the right thing because it is the right thing. This is the kind of honor that is aware that when nobody else is watching God is watching. This kind of honor we will call Rabbah honor. Rabbah honor is a spiritual gut check that forces us to confront our integrity. We may look good in the eyes of most people. Rabbah honor is concerned with looking good in the eyes of God.

We continue our holy land tour by visiting the Amman Citadel. At nearly 2800 feet in elevation the citadel rises above the city. Because of this, it has been a fortress for various governments for thousands of years. The perimeter wall is 5500 feet long. A museum was built there in 1951 but the history goes back much further. There were people living there when God called Moses out of Ur.

Among the various ruins is an 8<sup>th</sup> century palace built after the area came under Muslim rule. During the time the Romans occupied the city they erected the Temple of Hercules. Before that Greeks renamed the city Philadelphia. Long before that, it was known as Rabbath-Amman, or Rabbah.

Rabbah is the name this fortress was known as in 2 Samuel 11:1, “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel. And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.” This verse is surrounded by acts of honor and shame.

**Honor Displayed** (2 Samuel 10:1-6)

There are pieces of our lives that display commendable honor. David has a bunch of those. One of those honorable acts took place right here in Ammon.

David sought to show honor to the fallen Ammonite king Nahash by showing kindness to his son, Hanun. Hanun rejected the honor after listening to Ammonite princes who said, “Do you think, because David has sent comforters to you, that he is honoring your father? Has not David sent his servants to you to search the city and to spy it out and to overthrow it?”.

In responding to the honorable act of David the Ammonites did something that made David’s men “greatly ashamed” (v.5). They shaved off half of their beards and cut off their garments at the buttocks (v.4). Here it is, honor and shame playing out at Rabbah.

Nobody does beards like the middle east. That part of the world is filled with well-groomed male faces and many different facial hair styles. My experience at a barber shop in Egypt left an impression. After a precise shave with a straight razor, I experienced something they called fetlah. The barber held dental floss between his teeth and twisted it around his fingers. Somehow, the floss formed a tightly twisted triangle that pulled hair out of my face as the barber moved his hands and head. It felt wrong to scream or cry but it was hard not to.

If you are one of those students who can sign the honor statement saying that you read every word of the commentary, you might read insights like this one, “According to Middle East tradition no greater indignity could have been put upon them. The beard was considered a symbol of manhood, and, in some places, of freedom—slaves were compelled to shave their beards in token of servitude.”<sup>1</sup> Beards were honor. Shaved faces were shame.

This association has continued into recent history. In 1764 Kerim Kahn, chief of the Iranian Znad tribe, sent ambassadors to an independent territory in the Persian Gulf ruled by Mir Mahenna. He demanded to have the territory and threatened to send troops to reinforce his demands. One commentary talks about Mahenna’s interesting and familiar response to the ambassadors. He “treated the ambassadors with great contempt, which was especially marked by cutting off their beards.”<sup>2</sup>

The part about the cutting off the clothes in the middle doesn’t take too much imagination to see it as shameful. One little detail helps solidify the shamefulness. At that time, the only Israelites known to wear undergarments were the priests.

We have had those times when, like David, we behaved honorably. Others who see are impressed. And we can be proud of our conduct. We have had other times when we were just jerks like Hanun. David has a history of consistently behaving honorably when it would have been so easy for him to behave less honorably.

***David defended the honor of God in fighting Goliath.***

**1 Samuel 17:36** Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.

***David made an honored covenant of friendship with Jonathan.***

**1 Samuel 20:14-15** But as long as I live, promise me that you will show me kindness because of the Lord. And even when I die, never stop being kind to my family. The Lord will wipe each of David’s enemies off the face of the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Freeman, J. M., & Chadwick, H. J. (1998). [\*Manners & customs of the Bible\*](#) (p. 223). North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers.

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**1 Samuel 20:23** We have made a promise to each other, and the Lord is a witness between you and me forever.

***David treated Saul with honor when Saul was searching to kill him.***

**1 Samuel 24:4-6** Then David arose and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's robe. And afterward David's heart struck him, because he had cut off a corner of Saul's robe. He said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the Lord's anointed."

**1 Samuel 24:11-12** See, my father, see the corner of your robe in my hand. For by the fact that I cut off the corner of your robe and did not kill you, you may know and see that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you hunt my life to take it. May the Lord judge between me and you, may the Lord avenge me against you, but my hand shall not be against you.

**1 Samuel 24:17-19** He said to David, "You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. And you have declared this day how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when the Lord put me into your hands. For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safe? So may the Lord reward you with good for what you have done to me this day.

He did it again in chapter 26.

***David honored Saul after his death.***

**2 Samuel 1:12** And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

***David honored Solomon's family by showing kindness to Mephibosheth.***

**2 Samuel 9:1** And David said, "Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?"

David was not forced to do any of these things. He did them on his own honor.

**Honor Defended** (2 Samuel 10:6-19)

The distasteful shaving act resulted in hiring armies (v.6) and drawing battle lines (v.8). When honor is betrayed, battle lines are drawn. The conflict in your life may be from your lack of honor. It is a lack of honor that spills out in the acts of gossip, affairs, betrayal, cowardice, and lies. The dishonor sits silent until it bursts into conflict. You get away with it for a while but once it comes out the shame and the pain are well on their way to destroying you. Return to honor. Make it right before it results in war.

Now comes a transition from the story in chapter 10 to the story in chapter 11. Both feature Rabbah. Both feature honor and dishonor. The difference is that David displayed Rabbah honor in the first story and he loses it in the second. Rabbah honor does not exempt wrong behavior because of previous honorable behavior. A resume of honor, surrendered to God, sets us up from dishonorable collapse.

**Honor Compromised** (2 Samuel 11:1)

We compromise our honor when we are not faithful in the small things God has called us to. Scholars debate whether David was doing something wrong by not going to war with his men. Bergen says, "The king's absence from the battlefield at this time should not be understood as dereliction of duty. David had previously remained in Jerusalem when the Ammonites were attacked (cf. 10:7). David's men had pleaded with him to avoid an active role in military campaigns (cf. 21:17)."<sup>3</sup> Still the text says, "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, Joab led out the army and ravaged the country of the Ammonites and came and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. And Joab struck down Rabbah and overthrew it." (2 Samuel 11:1). Kings went to war but not King David. David had gone to war many times before. It is possible that David's absence from the battlefield was his initial compromise of honor. In this case, the slippery slope didn't start with adultery, it started with neglected duty. If he would have been at war, he would not have been on his porch looking down on bathing women.

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<sup>3</sup> Bergen, R. D. (1996). *1, 2 Samuel* (Vol. 7, pp. 363–364). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

**Honor Tested** (2 Samuel 11:2-5)

Once honor is compromised, we open the door to be tested.

Verse 2 says, "It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful."

It happened. Temptation just happens. We cannot avoid some difficult situations. That is where honor is tested. We need a character of honor to stay faithful when we are presented with a situation in which it would be so easy to not choose honor. Temptation is not sin. It is not the first look that is sin, it's the second. A glance becomes a gaze.

**Honor Lost** (2 Samuel 11:6-27)

The story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah presents Honor and shame standing in striking contrast.

David behaves shamefully, he commits adultery. Uriah behaves honorably. He walks to Jerusalem, a 40 plus mile trip, at the king's command. He needed a good reason to pull him off the battle line. Uriah was one of David's top 37 mighty men (2 Samuel 23:39). Then David invites Uriah to act dishonorably by telling him to sleep with his wife. She was his wife after all. But that would not be honorable while his companions were at war. Turning back to the commentary again we find that, "David seems to have required soldiers carrying out military assignments to keep themselves in a state of ritual purity, which necessarily meant refraining from all sexual contact (cf. 1 Sam 21:5; Exodus 19:15)." <sup>4</sup> There was no sex when the ark was out of town. Sex made David, and would have made Uriah, ceremonially unclean (Lev 15:18).

The shame and honor contrast continued as David attempted to get his way by getting Uriah drunk (v.13). This is a trick that had a history with the Ammonites. Lots daughters got him drunk to have children with him. His younger daughter has a son named Ben-Ammi. He is the father of the Ammonites (Genesis 19:30-38). David behaved in a dishonorable way that gave birth to the enemies he was fighting. Uriah maintained his honor. It would have been so easy not to. He had permission, even urging from the king.

When this didn't work David had to decide if he would die or Uriah, the penalty was death for his act. Uriah honorably carried his own death letter without peeking (v.14). The command led the army to break good form and get close to the wall, just to cover up sin. We know what wall that was. It was the fortress of Rabbah (2 Samuel 11:1). This is Rabbah honor. The thing David once had. It is the honor that refuses a possibly dishonorable act even when the king gives permission and applies pressure to perform it. It is the honor that follows the instructions of the king to your own death.

It was a mess, but it appeared to all work out (v.27). David could have the woman and baby without shame. David even came out looking good, honorably taking in the widow of a fallen warrior. But dishonor displeases God. Rabbah honor is doing the right thing in the eyes of God. A cover up of shame can preserve honor in the eyes of man. The cover up doesn't defend your honor, it buries it. It might fool man, but it doesn't please God.

The text goes to a place of shame, of conviction, of being exposed. Let's let ourselves go there also. Ask for the holy spirit to bring conviction. If he does let yourselves struggle with the weight of it. He wants to have a moment of heart searching with you. And that is uncomfortable. It would be so easy to check out spiritually and make it through until potluck. We have not maintained Rabbah honor. We need grace.

**Honor Restored** (2 Samuel 12:1-14, 26-31; Ps. 51)

God's grace restores honor in the very place of our shame. God used Nathan to bring confrontations, rebuke and conviction to David. Even our dishonor can be redeemed when it is exposed and corrected by the light of God.

**Ephesians 3:19-21** And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness

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<sup>4</sup> Bergen, R. D. (1996). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 7, p. 366). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

There were consequences to David’s sin. His character marred. His son died. When we see faithful David on the hillside, keeping a loving eye on the sheep, we also see unfaithful David on the rooftop, with a lustful eye on Bathsheba. When we see bold David taking on the Giant while Israel’s soldiers cowardly hide in their camp, we also see cowardly David staying in his palace while Israel’s soldiers boldly die in battle at David’s command. God forgives, but sin doesn’t.

How did the great man of God fall? He didn’t crash out of nowhere; A tower comes crashing down suddenly because the foundation has been slowly deteriorating. No man falls “all of the sudden”. It is small wrong choices that take grip in his heart. It is compromise, indulgence, and cover up. Don’t think that any sin is too little to matter. Sin leads to death. Look at your foundation, the strength of the tower depends on how you care for the foundation today. In the same way no man “suddenly” becomes great. He does the right thing, because it is right, and the foundation is healthy, and he is in a position to grow. Your character is built by the little things. Rabbah honor is maintained and destroyed in the little things.

David was able to kill the giant because he trusted in God to kill the bear and the lion. He was able to lead the people of God because he was faithful to lead the sheep of his father. Life might not be glamorous but keep doing right, faithfully! We have no idea what great work God might be preparing you for in the little things.

Praise God for exposure in shame or David might not have turned to God for life. The story ends with restored honor. Not because David deposited from his own merit bank, but because God is so gracious. There was repentance and forgiveness.

The story of Rabbah honor started with the honorable behavior of King David and the shameful behavior of King Hanun. It continued the shameful behavior of King David and the honorable behavior of Uriah the Hittite. It ends with the grace of God and the honoring of a fallen repentant sinner.

David captured Rabbah and took the crown of their king on his own head (2 Samuel 12:29-30). God allowed him to be honored. And he created within him a new heart.

Rabbah honor seeks to look good in the eyes of God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The closing illustration told on May 14, 2022 was about Claire Nelson.  
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/alone-and-injured-in-the-wild/id1462484363?i=1000525727649>