



# The Rain Reveals the Leaks

## *How the Vulnerability of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

When we consider the issue of vulnerability in the context of sexual abuse, we think of the vulnerable as those who have been victimized by abuse, and there is truth in this view. However, it is also important to recognize the vulnerability that abuse exposes in our own hearts and systems. It is easy, when the rains are far away, to assume our roofs are well-built and secure, but it is when the rain begins pouring over our own houses that the leaks become obvious. When we see only the vulnerability within the victims of sexual abuse, we too often blame the victims for their weakness and insist that if they strengthened themselves, the problem of sexual abuse would be resolved. However, if a child lives in a leaky house, teaching them to hold an umbrella over their head will not solve the problem. We must pay attention to the cries of the vulnerable to find and repair the hidden leaks in our systems, but we must also examine what the needs of the vulnerable reveal in our own hearts. As Christ teaches us in the parable of the sheep and the goats, it is how we respond to the cries of the vulnerable and not how many great deeds we claim to perform in the name of Christ which determines whether we are aligned with the Spirit of Christ or another spirit. An examination of pastoral responses to abuse, academic abuse research, and the Scriptures clearly demonstrate that there are severe ‘leaks’ in the ‘roof’ of the Church which we must address.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented as an invited lead paper (plenary presentation) on 17 October 2023 at the International Academic Conference of Baptist College of Theology, Oyo (17–19 October 2023) in Oyo, Nigeria; it will appear in the next issue of *Baptist Journal of Theology* (the Journal of the Baptist College of Theology, Oyo). The conference theme was “Vulnerability, Molestation and Church’s Response.”

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

**Résumé**

Lorsque nous examinons la question de la vulnérabilité dans le contexte des abus sexuels, nous pensons que les personnes vulnérables sont celles qui ont été victimes d'abus, et il y a du vrai dans ce point de vue. Cependant, il est également important de reconnaître la vulnérabilité que les abus révèlent dans nos propres cœurs et systèmes. Il est facile, lorsque la pluie est loin, de penser que nos toits sont bien construits et sûrs, mais c'est lorsque la pluie commence à tomber sur nos propres maisons que les fuites deviennent évidentes. Lorsque nous ne voyons que la vulnérabilité des victimes d'abus sexuels, nous leur reprochons trop souvent leur faiblesse et insistons sur le fait que si elles se renforçaient elles-mêmes, le problème des abus sexuels serait résolu. Cependant, si un enfant vit dans une maison qui prend l'eau, lui apprendre à tenir un parapluie au-dessus de sa tête ne résoudra pas le problème. Nous devons prêter attention aux cris des personnes vulnérables pour trouver et réparer les fuites cachées dans nos systèmes, mais nous devons également examiner ce que les besoins des personnes vulnérables révèlent dans nos propres cœurs. Comme le Christ nous l'enseigne dans la parabole des brebis et des boucs, c'est la manière dont nous répondons aux cris des personnes vulnérables, et non le nombre de grandes actions que nous prétendons accomplir au nom du Christ, qui détermine si nous sommes alignés sur l'Esprit du Christ ou sur un autre esprit. Un examen des réponses pastorales aux abus, de la recherche universitaire sur les abus et des Écritures démontre clairement qu'il y a de graves "fuites" dans le "toit" de l'Église et que nous devons y remédier.

**Resumo**

Quando consideramos a questão da vulnerabilidade no contexto do abuso sexual, pensamos nos vulneráveis como aqueles que foram vitimados pelo abuso, e há verdade nesta visão. No entanto, também é importante reconhecer a vulnerabilidade que o abuso expõe nos nossos próprios corações e sistemas. É fácil, quando as chuvas estão longe, assumir que os nossos telhados estão bem construídos e seguros, mas é quando a chuva começa a cair sobre as nossas próprias casas que as infiltrações se tornam óbvias. Quando vemos apenas a vulnerabilidade das vítimas de abuso sexual, muitas vezes culpamos as vítimas pela sua fraqueza e insistimos que, se elas se fortalecessem, o problema do abuso sexual estaria resolvido. No entanto, se uma criança vive numa casa com infiltrações, ensiná-la a segurar um guarda-chuva sobre a cabeça não resolverá o problema. Temos de prestar atenção aos gritos dos vulneráveis para encontrar e reparar as fugas escondidas nos nossos sistemas, mas também temos de examinar o que as necessidades dos vulneráveis revelam nos nossos próprios corações. Tal como Cristo nos

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

ensina na parábola das ovelhas e dos cabritos, é a forma como respondemos aos gritos dos vulneráveis e não o número de grandes acções que afirmamos realizar em nome de Cristo que determina se estamos alinhados com o Espírito de Cristo ou com outro espírito. Uma análise das respostas pastorais aos abusos, da investigação académica sobre abusos e das Escrituras demonstra claramente que há graves "fugas" no "telhado" da Igreja, que temos de resolver.

**Keywords**

vulnerability, abuse, church response to abuse

**Mots-clés**

vulnérabilité, abus, réponse de l'église aux abus

**Palavras-chave**

vulnerabilidade, abuso, resposta da igreja ao abuso

My children have a book entitled *Lazy Lion* by Mwenye Hadithi and Adrienne Kennaway. In the book, Lazy Lion sees the clouds appear in the sky and declares, “The Big Rain is coming. I will need a roof to keep me dry. And since I am the King of Beasts, I will order a fine house to be built.”<sup>2</sup> He orders a succession of other animals to build houses for him, but he is dissatisfied with every house. The White Ants build him a majestic termite mound like a palace, but Lazy Lion refuses to live in the dirt. The Weaver Birds build him a large nest, but Lazy Lion won't live in a tree. The Ant Bear, the Honey Badger, and the Crocodile also fail to please Lazy Lion. When the clouds finally burst, all the animals rush into the houses they had offered Lazy Lion and find shelter from the rain, but Lazy Lion has no house to shelter in. To this day, Lazy Lion endures the rains without shelter.

This children's story is built upon the truth that a house is meant to provide shelter when the rains arrive, yet sometimes even houses can fail to shelter those inside because they have leaks. In 2008, a Maasai neighbor invited me to help her repair the roof of her traditional house in preparation for the rains. As we worked together, she taught me an important concept: *It is the rain which reveals the leaks*. It is tempting for us to blame the leaks on the rain itself. If there were no rain, there would be no leaks, but the holes in the roof through which the leaks pour during the rains had already been developing throughout the dry season. The rain does not cause the leaks; it reveals the leaks which are already present. One of the jobs of a Maasai woman is to tend the roof before

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<sup>2</sup> Mwenye Hadithi and Adrienne Kennaway, *Lazy Lion*, 1.

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

the rains arrive so that when the rains do come, her family will have shelter, and then she is to watch attentively when the rains begin, to ensure that she has not missed any holes.

Meteorologists tell us that we are currently in an El Niño weather season,<sup>3</sup> with record heat waves in parts of the world while other parts are expecting extreme rainfall and flooding. It is a time to be indoors, sheltering from the heat and the rains, but unfortunately many houses are not the shelter they should be. Some houses are built like ovens, designed to keep heat inside. Others are leaky or vulnerable to collapsing in the floods. What are we to do when our places of shelter actually increase our vulnerability rather than offering us safety? We must repair or rebuild our houses. Similarly, we are amid a global El Niño event regarding sexual abuse. The Joshua Center on Child Sexual Abuse Prevention states, “Though it is underreported and under-recorded, child sexual abuse [CSA] is a widespread global issue experienced by up to 31% of girls and 17.6% of boys.”<sup>4</sup> The Journalist’s Resource reports that the highest rates of CSA are in Africa, with especially high rates in South Africa.<sup>5</sup> Here in Nigeria, human rights groups have alerted the country to rapidly rising rates of CSA.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, End Violence states that online CSA is increasing and citing a survey by WeProtect, which found that “57% of the surveyed girls and 48% of the surveyed boys reported “at least one online sexual harm, with some regions — like North America, Australasia, and Western Europe — being even higher.”<sup>7</sup> There is nowhere on the globe where our children are safe from sexual abuse. We are clearly in an El Niño event regarding CSA, with rising floodwaters across the globe. Our children need shelter, and we, as the Church, should be a house which offers children refuge from the rains and floods.

Unfortunately, the rains have revealed widespread leaks in the Church and in the hearts of its leaders and members. These leaks leave children in danger of CSA even within the Church itself, and it is on this topic that I will focus in this paper. Too often, church leaders have presumed the Church universal, or their own denominations or individual congregations, to be impervious to sexual abuse scandals, and, because of this presumption, they have failed to maintain the integrity of their roofs. This presumption has two parts. First, there are church leaders who believe that the Church itself is, for the most part, immune to sexual abuse. Because they consider the church immune, they do

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<sup>3</sup> When the paper was presented in October 2023.

<sup>4</sup> “On Child Sexual Abuse | Joshua Center on Child Sexual Abuse.”

<sup>5</sup> John Wihbey, “Global Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse.”

<sup>6</sup> E.g., see Victor Ifeanyi Ede and Dominic Zuoke Kalu, “Child Abuse in Nigeria: Responses of Christian Churches and the Way Out.”

<sup>7</sup> End Violence Against Children, “Global Threat Assessment 2021 Shows Dramatic Increase in Online Child Sexual Exploitation & Abuse | End Violence.”

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

not take any precautions to prevent abuse, and they disbelieve the victims who cry out about abuse. Second, these scandals have revealed that many church leaders knew that sexual abuse was taking place within their churches but believed that they could and should *prevent scandal* by silencing, blaming, and further abusing the victims rather than by addressing the scandal, which has already occurred, by rightly addressing the abuse. Thus, by church leaders either refusing to inspect the roof to prevent and repair leaks and/or silencing those on whom the leaks have fallen, the church’s roof has become riddled with leaks, as with the church building in Alan Paton’s powerfully prophetic book, *Cry, the Beloved Country*.<sup>8</sup> It is beyond the space allowed for this article to explore specific — and necessary! — questions of the nature and parameters of accountability and justice. My focus, in the context of abuse ‘leaking’ (or pouring) into the church, is on identifying the *source* of those leaks so that we know where to focus our efforts on ‘repairing the roof’ and preventing further leaks. The conference at which an earlier version of this article was presented was on the theme “Vulnerability, Molestation and Church’s Response,” so, for the purposes of this article, I use the term *vulnerability* throughout to describe the source of these leaks.<sup>9</sup>

In 2021, I shared a meme on Facebook which asked a question: “Why does the church ask the victim, ‘did you forgive?’ instead of asking the perpetrator, ‘did you repent?’” One pastor replied, “my sermons as I preach are much more focused on forgiveness, because that’s who’s in my congregation. And I’d say most congregations. I think both questions are valid. I think a reason why perpetrators are not asked the questions as much and it seems off balance is because they are not the people in the churches” (5 May 2021). This response reveals how a pastor’s presumptions regarding the nature of his own congregation as well as the nature of the church as a whole drive his preaching decisions, but his presumptions are only possible if he denies the validity of the multitudes of reports revealing widespread sexual abuse in the church. The reports are clear. Abusers are in our churches. Abuse is rampant in our

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<sup>8</sup> Chapter 32 in Alan Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, first published in 1948.

<sup>9</sup> There is a danger of confusion when talking about *vulnerability* in the context of abuse. The bottom line is that victims need support while perpetrators need accountability. When we focus on the vulnerability of the victim to abuse, we often respond by holding the victim accountable to become less vulnerable instead of offering much needed compassionate support to the victim. However, when we focus on the vulnerability of sinful desires within the perpetrator, we often shift our response from accountability to support, viewing the desire to harm another person as too difficult for the perpetrator to resist without sympathetic support. Note that in the section in which I direct our focus toward the vulnerability, or culpability, of the perpetrator, I still maintain that the appropriate and necessary response is on accountability — abusers *must* be held accountable; see Matthew 18:6–9.

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

churches.

Rather than acknowledge the truth, church leaders choose to believe the church is exceptional. Sexual abuse happens elsewhere, not in our churches. Unfortunately, church abuse statistics demonstrate just how false these claims are. As Boz Tchividjan, founder of GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment) and grandson of Billy Graham, wrote, citing a US based study,

It is critical to note that this abuse is no less prevalent within the faith community. In fact, there are studies that demonstrate that the faith community is even more vulnerable to abuse than secular environments. The Abel and Harlow study revealed that 93% of sex offenders describe themselves as “religious” and that this category of offender may be the most dangerous. Other studies have found that sexual abusers within faith communities have more victims and younger victims.<sup>10</sup>

Akani’s research in Nigeria suggests the same: when analyzing crime data for Christian and Muslim clergy, “the rate appears higher among Christian clerics.”<sup>11</sup> *We must assess our churches, and we must listen to the reports of those who have assessed our churches.* We must learn the wisdom of the Maasai and pay heed to what the rains are revealing regarding the Church. From the foundation of the Church, there has been sexual abuse within its walls. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-2, Paul writes, “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father’s wife. And you are proud!”<sup>12</sup> Note Paul’s words, “of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate,” are echoed in the statistics quoted above, which reveal that the church is “even more vulnerable to abuse than secular environments.” The Apostle Paul listened to and believed the reports of sexual immorality within the church. The Apostle Paul acknowledged that the problem was actually worse in the church than outside it. We must as well.

The presumption of the church’s invulnerability to abuse has created the very conditions necessary to ensure that abuse thrives within the Church. As one minister/perpetrator told psychologist Anna Salter:

I considered church people also to fool... they have a trust that comes from being Christians. . . . They tend to be better folks all around. And they seem to want to believe in the good that exists in all people. . . . I think they want to believe in people. And because

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<sup>10</sup> Boz Tchividjian, “Startling Statistics: Child Sexual Abuse and What the Church Can Do About It.”

<sup>11</sup> Abdul Hakeem A Akanni, “Evil Men in the House of God: An Analytical Study of the Involvement of Christian and Muslim Clerics in Crime in Nigeria,” 259.

<sup>12</sup> All Scripture quotations are from NIV (2011).

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

of that, you can easily convince, with or without convincing words.<sup>13</sup>

Nigerian scholars Adesanya Ibiyinka Olusola and Clement Ogunlusi write, “An important thing that the Church needs to admit is that child rape happens and that it happens among its own members.”<sup>14</sup> Child sexual abuse happens. It happens in the church. It happens among its own members, and worse, it happens among its own leaders. A. A. Akanni’s research found that Christian and Muslim clergy are involved in crime in Nigeria “just like any other person.” He adds that “sexual immorality of all sorts tops the list” of crimes they commit.<sup>15</sup> The phrase “just like any other person” is a key point. We must stop assuming that our churches, members, and leaders are exceptional, as in the pastor’s statement above: “they are not the people in the churches.” This is directly countered by Scriptural testimony, academic research, and the great multitude of media reports from around the globe. In Hosea 4:6, God declares, “my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.” We must do the work to gain the knowledge we need. The data is available to us if we will look for it.

Let us consider a parable. A Maasai man owned a flock of sheep. He lived in the village he had inherited from his father. He knew his father had built a good fence and a strong sheepfold. He decided that it would be dishonoring of his father to inspect and maintain the walls surrounding his village and his sheepfold. He also decided that it would be dishonoring of his father to guard the sheep within those walls. His father was a wise man who did excellent work. The walls he built must therefore be the best and safest walls anyone could build. He must trust his father’s work. Because he presumed the sheep were secure within his father’s walls, the man did not count the flock morning and night. He did not take them out to graze. Instead, he fed them grain in the sheepfold. There was not enough food for the sheep, so the stronger sheep began to butt away the weaker sheep, but the man did not notice. He spent his days raiding to find new sheep.

Unfortunately, leopards found the man’s home. They did not have the same assumptions as the man. They could hear the bleating of sheep. They could smell the tasty flock. They tested the security of the walls by leaping them. And they met no guards. The leopards were wiser than the shepherd. They assessed the walls and found them unprotected. The walls, in the absence of guards, did not protect the sheep but rather trapped the sheep. There was nowhere for the sheep to hide from the leopards. The leopards began to live in

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<sup>13</sup> Anna C. Salter, *Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists, and Other Sex Offenders; Who They Are, How They Operate and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Adesanya Ibiyinka Olusola and Clement Ogunlusi, “Recurring Cases of Child Rape in Nigeria: An Issue for Church Intervention,” 63.

<sup>15</sup> Akanni, “Evil Men in the House of God,” 259.

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

the trees surrounding the fence. Whenever they were hungry, they would leap the fence and take a sheep. The man never noticed the missing sheep.

Lions, too, found the walls, but they decided to live in the sheepfold itself. The lions were also wiser than the man. They assessed the flock. They noticed which sheep the stronger sheep pushed away from the food and targeted those weaker sheep. The stronger sheep didn't protest. Fewer sheep meant more food for the rest. When the Maasai man saw the lions, he was not disturbed. He saw their presence as proof of the power of his father's walls. Most of the sheep seemed unafraid of the lions, so he concluded the walls had transformed the predators into friends of sheep. The lions were big cats, and like any cat, they enjoyed playing with their prey before eating. They would pounce and claw, then let their prey go; pounce again and gnaw, then let it go; over and over. When the prey bleated in pain and terror, the man came, but rather than protecting the targeted sheep, he beat it for bleating. The man thought, “The lions clearly hadn't meant to hurt the sheep; after all, the sheep isn't dead. It is only scratched. The lions are clearly trying to learn how to be gentle with their claws and teeth, but they make mistakes. The sheep needs to be understanding of the lions' rougher nature and learn to live at peace with them like all the other sheep.” Eventually, the lions would kill and eat their prey. The man never missed it. He was only relieved that it had stopped bleating.

The weaker sheep were also wiser than the man. They saw that the sheepfold wasn't safe. They began to stay near the doors, waiting for the man to enter. When the door opened, they would dart through it to escape to safety. They knew they would be safer outside the sheepfold. They knew they would find grass to eat and bushes to hide in. When the man saw them flee, he only shook his head and called them foolish. Only a foolish sheep would flee the safety of the sheepfold his father had built. He decided they were unworthy sheep. He saw that the stronger sheep were not fleeing and decided they were worthy sheep. He was not concerned that his flock was shrinking as the vulnerable sheep fled. He did not go after the fleeing sheep to protect and help them. Instead, he determined to go raiding again in hopes of finding more worthy sheep to fill his sheepfold.

The other Maasai men were wiser than him, and they criticized the man's careless shepherding, but he replied that his shepherding demonstrated his deep honor for his father and his love for the sheep. He told them that he knew his father was the greatest and wisest father. He insisted that this meant that his father's walls were truly the best and safest walls, and that all sheep would be safest within his father's walls rather than within the walls of other sheepfolds. He accused the other Maasai men of hating his father for holding him accountable for his failure to protect the sheep. Yet the man's father had indeed been a very wise man, who had taught his son how to inspect and repair the walls



Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

and how to shepherd wisely and provide for and protect the sheep. It was the son who despised and neglected the teaching of his father, and the wise counsel of the other Maasai men was that he should follow his father’s teachings. Yet the man called their wisdom foolishness and his own foolishness wisdom, and thus he made the sheepfold his wise father had built a destroyer of sheep rather than a protector of sheep.

What is the greatest vulnerability in this parable? There are many vulnerabilities. There are the “weaker sheep.” Will strengthening these sheep protect the flock from predators? No. The predators will only target different sheep. There is the inadequate supply of food, causing the sheep to compete for food. Will providing more food protect the flock from predators? No. The culture of the strong taking from the weak will remain. There are the leopards and lions living with the flock. Will removing individual predators protect the flock? Not fully. Other predators will still enter the sheepfold. The single greatest vulnerability in the parable is the man’s own assumptions, and the single greatest step that could be taken to protect the flock would be for the man to question his assumptions and to assess for vulnerabilities within his own walls and his own shepherding system. The same is true in the church. “The biggest and most costly mistake church leadership can make related to child sexual abuse is assuming ‘it can’t happen here.’”<sup>16</sup> In my work urging the Church to address abuse, I have found that church leaders consistently rely on their own assumptions, but this tendency is not found only in individual leaders. Christian institutions and entire denominations live as the foolish shepherd in my parable does, as one leader told me when I urged for an assessment to be made: “I just don’t think our denomination struggles with abuse like other denominations do.” It is essential that we understand that the primary vulnerability of the church regarding molestation is our unwillingness to examine our walls and to admit the truth of what such an analysis reveals.

The Broken Silence report calls for pastoral “awareness” of the issue, finding that “an overwhelming majority” of the Christian faith leaders who responded to their survey (74%) “underestimate the level of sexual and domestic violence experienced within their congregations.”<sup>17</sup> 65% of the respondents reported that they address sexual or domestic violence from the pulpit at most one time a year, with 10% reporting they never address it.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, 62% reported that they have offered couple marriage counseling to the batterer and spouse when responding to sexual or domestic violence within their congregations. Broken Silence noted that this is alarming: “a potentially dangerous or even potentially

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<sup>16</sup> Floyd, “Child Sexual Abuse and the Church.”

<sup>17</sup> “Broken Silence: A Call for Churches to Speak Out.”

<sup>18</sup> “Broken Silence: A Call for Churches to Speak Out.”

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

lethal response.”<sup>19</sup> The Faith Trust Institute policy statement regarding domestic violence states that “Couple counseling is not a viable therapeutic tool for use in violent family relationships.”<sup>20</sup> Again, we see that pastoral presumptions shape their regular preaching as well as their responses to specific abuse cases and that these presumptions lead to increased risk for church members who are already experiencing violence. I believe we must go beyond pastoral awareness. Every member of our congregations must become more aware of these issues. Jeff Vines, who was mentored by apologist Ravi Zacharias, addressed the need for church members to be watchful in the aftermath of the revelations that Zacharias had been a serial sexual predator. “Those of us in leadership who are on the wrong path are depending on the fact that you don’t want to know about it. Any organization in this day and age that does not create systems of accountability will eventually come to ruin.” He stressed that we must stop giving our leaders “the ultimate benefit of a doubt.”<sup>21</sup> Every member of our churches must become more educated and watchful regarding sexual abuse.

How do these presumptions affect our responses to the threat of molestation? A few years ago, a friend told me that while visiting another family, a man was ogling her teenage daughter. The two mothers pulled the daughter aside and urged her to add extra covering to her body, even though she was already dressed modestly. This is a very common response, but does changing clothing protect girls and women from sexual assault? Jen Brockman and Dr. Mary Wyandt-Hiebert’s 2013 art exhibit at the University of Arkansas entitled “What Were You Wearing? Survivor Art Installation” featured sexual assault victim’s clothing to show how flawed this presumption is.<sup>22</sup> Since then, many eponymous exhibits have opened. In their online exhibit, the Dove Center urges visitors to challenge our “own long-held beliefs about sexual assault that are, in reality, myths and stereotypes that can aid perpetrators of crime in avoiding accountability for their choices.”<sup>23</sup> Speaking at the opening of the UN headquarters exhibit in New York in 2022, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations Amina Mohammed stated that the clothing in the exhibit “demonstrate[s] more clearly than any legal argument could that women and girls are attacked regardless of what they were wearing. The power of some of

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<sup>19</sup> “Broken Silence: A Call for Churches to Speak Out.”

<sup>20</sup> Phyllis B. Frank and Beverly D. Houghton, “A Policy Statement on Domestic Violence Couples Counseling.”

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Silliman, “Missions Organizations Urged to Assess Abuse Accountability.”

<sup>22</sup> “What Were You Wearing?” (WWYW) Installation.

<sup>23</sup> “What Were You Wearing?” Exhibit — DOVE Center of St. George Utah.”

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

these clothes lies in their ordinariness.”<sup>24</sup> She called on the UN to place the blame for sexual violence on “gender inequality” and on “patriarchal structures in our societies.”<sup>25</sup> Sexual molestation is not caused by the victim’s clothing.

In Matthew 5:28 Jesus says, “I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” He tells those who lust, “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (v. 29). This concept is so important that he repeats it nearly verbatim, “And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell” (v. 30). We can see the truth of this teaching in the story of David and Bathsheba. David was walking on his roof and chanced to see Bathsheba bathing, which led him to send for her and then rape her. We can infer that David saw parts of Bathsheba’s body which were erotic to him, yet God does not place the blame on Bathsheba for tempting David with her exposed skin. In his parable, Nathan displays Bathsheba as an innocent lamb, and lays the blame fully on David, “Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes?” (2 Sam 12:7, 9). God did not blame David’s crime on the body of Bathsheba but on the wickedness in David’s own heart; David’s culpability is his heart vulnerability. Even if a man sees a woman or child naked, he is still accountable for his own lustful thoughts and actions. Victims are not responsible for abuse; the perpetrator is.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> “What Were You Wearing? UN Exhibit Demands Justice for Survivors of Sexual Violence | Spotlight Initiative.”

<sup>25</sup> “What Were You Wearing? UN Exhibit Demands Justice.”

<sup>26</sup> There is a dangerous trend which works very hard to blame Bathsheba and to exonerate, or at least excuse, David. See, for example, Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10–12*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 75 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1990), 86; Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, “Slingshots, Ships, and Personal Psychosis: Murder, Sexual Intrigue, and Power in the Lives of David and Othello,” in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible*, Semeia Studies 44 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 59; Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 2003), 56; and Nigerian scholar Honor Sewapo, “Seduction of Leadership Success: A Reconsideration of King David and Bathsheba Seductive Practice,” *Insight: Journal of Religious Studies* 10 (2014): 51–66. All such treatments are guilty of eisegesis. In both the Hebrew MT and the Greek LXX, the biblical text only blames David and refers to Bathsheba as “a lamb,” both innocent and the victim.

For responsible exegesis of this narrative, see Jennifer I. Andruska, “‘Rape’ in the syntax of 2 Samuel 11:4,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 129, no. 1 (2017): 103–109; Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old*

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

Kgaugelo Lekalakala researched the justifying narratives given by perpetrators of child sexual abuse in South Africa. She found two main rationales. First, there was childhood adversity, accentuated by dissatisfaction in adulthood with their relationships with women.<sup>27</sup> This justification gives context for molestation, but it cannot be an explanation, because, as many scholars and lay people have observed, this does not account for the existence of the many people who face childhood adversity and struggle with dissatisfaction in adult relationships who do *not* go on to commit child sexual abuse. Second, her research revealed “pro-abusive attitudes to women and young children” in the justifications offered by the perpetrators.<sup>28</sup> Their narratives demonstrated the ways in which “socio-cultural factors including patriarchal notions of manhood, mainly a belief in sexual entitlement, are used to justify CSA.”<sup>29</sup> She concluded that these factors led to a failure to accept responsibility and to victim-blaming.<sup>30</sup> As we discussed above, God confronts the heart vulnerability of the powerful regarding their assaults on the physical vulnerability of the weak, calling them toward ownership of responsibility for their own sinful actions, and we see this in the parable the prophet Nathan told David. Nathan tells David, “You are the man!” (2 Sam 12:7), indicating that David is the guilty party in the rape of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. God held David accountable for his sins against both Uriah and Bathsheba, and we see David taking responsibility for his sinful actions in Psalm 51: “For I know my transgressions, / and my sin is always before me.”

However, Nathan’s parable also reveals a sense of entitlement in David. The parable describes David as a wealthy man with many sheep, who, when an unexpected guest arrives, steals a poor man’s beloved only sheep. David’s power and wealth led to his failure to esteem the humanity of those less powerful, which led him to rape and murder. God urges David to recognize this vulnerability within his heart. However, David’s confession in Psalm 51 reveals that, while David accepted responsibility for his sinful actions, he continued to dismiss the inherent worth of his fellow human beings as demonstrated in verse 4: “Against you, you only, have I sinned / and done what is evil in your sight; / so you are right in your verdict / and justified when you judge.” David failed to

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*Testament* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2007), 523–532; David E. Garland and Diana R. Garland, “Bathsheba’s Story: Surviving Abuse and Devastating Loss,” Chapter 6 in *Flawed Families of the Bible: How God’s Grace Works through Imperfect Relationships*, 153–177 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos, 2007); and Nigerian scholar Solomon O. Ademiluka, “Interpreting the David–Bathsheba narrative (2 Sm 11:2–4).”

<sup>27</sup> Kgaugelo Lekalakala, “The Use of Patriarchy and a Sense of Entitlement in Justifying Gender-Based Violence Including Sexual Abuse of Young Children.”

<sup>28</sup> Lekalakala, “The Use of Patriarchy and a Sense of Entitlement.”

<sup>29</sup> Lekalakala, “The Use of Patriarchy and a Sense of Entitlement.”

<sup>30</sup> Lekalakala, “The Use of Patriarchy and a Sense of Entitlement.”

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

recognize the humanity of Uriah and Bathsheba. As Nathan prophesied, that heart cause, the unconquered vulnerability of the powerful despising the humanity of the less powerful, continued to wreak destruction in the lives of his descendants. Keltner states that “contexts of unchecked power make many of us vulnerable to, and complicit in, the abuse of power,” as we saw in King David.<sup>31</sup> Keltner argues that three things are needful to remedy this: 1) Even though the stories of the abused are overwhelming to hear, we must grow our capacity for distress and listen to these stories; 2) We need more women in positions of power; and 3) as has been noted above, we must challenge “the myths that sustain the abuses of power.”<sup>32</sup> I believe these three remedies offer a special challenge to pastors to address in their preaching. As just one example, pastors must examine how they teach the David and Bathsheba story and David’s confession in Psalm 51 to ensure they are not teaching in ways that perpetuate abuser justifications and victim blaming but rather preach in ways that challenge the powerful to recognize the full humanity of women and children.

Although the story of Cain and Abel is about murder rather than molestation, I believe it also offers wisdom for us as we consider vulnerability, molestation, and the church’s response. Just before Cain murders his brother Abel, the Bible tells us that God pulled one of the brothers aside and warns him that he is vulnerable and in danger of being destroyed. Which brother does God warn? Abel, who is about to be murdered by Cain, is physically vulnerable, yet God confronts Cain regarding *his* vulnerability. God warns Cain that sin is seeking to dominate him and urges him to conquer the sin instead: “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it” (Gen 4:6-7). God’s choice is unsettling. Why didn’t God warn Abel and send him away to preserve his life? The story focuses on Cain rather than Abel. Perhaps God did warn Abel, but Abel simply couldn’t comprehend that a brother could actually kill a brother, and perhaps, like Cain, the idea of fleeing his community for safety felt like a certain death sentence. We can’t argue from silence. What we are told is that God warned Cain that he was vulnerable. The abuser is vulnerable, and the abuser must be confronted. As illustrated in the story about my friend’s daughter, we regularly choose ineffective strategies to prevent abuse and place burdensome demands on those who are physically vulnerable. Instead, we must confront the vulnerability in the hearts of the molesters. I ask us to consider ourselves in the position of the women. Would we have urged the daughter or the ogler to change their behavior? As the Dove Center suggests, we must hold

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<sup>31</sup> Dagher Keltner, “What the Science of Power Can Tell Us About Sexual Harassment.”

<sup>32</sup> Keltner, “What the Science of Power Can Tell Us.”

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

the abusers themselves accountable. We must also address the harmful gendered biases and systems within our churches and societies and confront our own vulnerabilities evidenced in our failure to confront those who endanger women and children.

Noting the reality that victims of sexual assault experience the reporting process as an additional significant trauma, Nicole Bedera analyzed how one US university responded to abuse allegations.<sup>33</sup> Like churches, despite statistics showing that 1 in 5 women students will experience sexual assault, and 1 in 10 men students will *commit* at least one act of sexual assault during university, university leaders insist that *their* individual institutions are the exception, and that students at their schools neither experience nor commit sexual assault.<sup>34</sup> She notes that in justifying their refusal to respond appropriately to sexual violence, they relied on victim-blaming stereotypes<sup>35</sup> and “himpathy,” a term coined by Manne to describe gendered sympathy, which prioritizes the narratives of men who perpetrate sexual assault over the experiences of their victims.<sup>36</sup> As one example, university staff justified their refusal to address sexual assault by citing concern that they might ruin the young man’s career by holding him accountable. Yet they failed to acknowledge that their refusal to address assault greatly impacted the victim’s studies and career. Gendered stereotypes allowed them to bypass the impact on the victims either by insisting that the victims had simply misunderstood the nature of their own assault due to hysteria or that the victims “were already damaged beyond repair” and could not be remedied by any action the university took.<sup>37</sup> Bedera notes that contrary to the claims of university staff, a positive outcome was of vital importance for victims, and adds that leaders “had the capacity to learn about the impact” their refusal to act had upon the victim, but instead, they insulated themselves from the victim’s stories. She adds, “As a result, there was no tension in administrators’ use of himpathy — their full attention was on the perpetrator.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Nichole Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped: Himpathy and Hysteria in Administrator Rationalizations of Institutional Betrayal.”

<sup>34</sup> Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped,” 1; citing Hayley Munguia, “College presidents appear to be delusional about sexual assault on their campuses,” *FiveThirtyEight*, 13 March 2015, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/college-presidents-appear-to-be-delusional-about-sexual-assault-on-their-campuses/>

<sup>35</sup> Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped,” 4.

<sup>36</sup> Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped,” 3.

<sup>37</sup> Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped,” 18.

<sup>38</sup> Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped,” 20.

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

Psychologist Jessica Freyd coined the terms “institutional betrayal”<sup>39</sup> and “betrayal trauma”<sup>40</sup> to describe this phenomenon and its impact. As a result of her research, Freyd founded an organization called “Center for Institutional Courage.” The Center’s website acknowledges our dependence on organizations for our well-being. We need schools and hospitals and churches and other institutions, but often, these institutions fail us when we need them most deeply. “We are in a terrible bind: **we depend on institutions that betray us.**”<sup>41</sup> Yet institutions fail us out of fear of their own vulnerability. If they acknowledge and address the harm, they fear decreased profits or even the destruction of the organization itself. It seems better to sacrifice the victims than to risk harm to the organization and its mission. Yet, as the Center notes, institutional betrayal harms everyone involved, including the institution itself. Institutional betrayal *causes* the very harm it seeks to prevent. As a result, the Center calls for “institutional courage,” which they define as:

... an institution’s commitment to seek the truth and engage in moral action, despite unpleasantness, risk, and short-term cost. It is a pledge to protect and care for those who depend on the institution. It is a compass oriented to the common good of individuals, institutions, and the world. It is a force that transforms institutions into more accountable, equitable, effective places for everyone.<sup>42</sup>

Institutional courage is not, Freyd argues, a fixed resource which you either have or lack. Instead, it is a resource we must cultivate and grow. This is a helpful framework for the church as we seek to address sexual assault. As Danya Ruttenberg notes, demands for perfection can prevent us from acting at all.<sup>43</sup> I would also note that demands for perfection often lead to abuse.

In her book *On Repentance and Repair*, Ruttenberg argues that “institutional repentance” is necessary in the aftermath of institutional betrayal. This repentance must contain two elements: 1) It must address the acts of betrayal which have already occurred, and 2) it must ensure that the organization will take a different course of action the next time such situations arise. She found that when organizations do the first part well, the second will

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<sup>39</sup> Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, 105; citing Carly Parnitzke Smith and Jennifer J. Freyd, “Dangerous Safe Havens: Institutional Betrayal Exacerbates Sexual Trauma,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 26, no. 1 (2013): 119–124.

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer J. Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*.

<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Freyd, “The Call to Courage.”

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Freyd, “The Call to Courage;” see also Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair*, 107.

<sup>43</sup> Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair*, 108.

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

naturally follow.<sup>44</sup> When an institution commits to address past harm by “transparent investigation, apology, and compensation,” it meets the needs of both victims and institutions.<sup>45</sup> Often, institutions want to bypass step 1 and skip to step 2, as one pastor told me, “You are going about this wrong. Instead of focusing on the harms done in the past, just focus on putting better systems in place for the future.” He told me that I would alienate people by pointing out the harm their actions have caused to victims in the past. But as Ruttenberg points out, it is this very process of examining the past which makes it possible for us to do better in the future.<sup>46</sup> Through investigation of our past mistakes, in which we truly listen to the victims’ stories and study how we have failed them, we are enabled to do the work both to make the past harms right and to prevent future harm. As Ruttenberg notes, we often minimize the value of apology, but true victim-centered apologies combined with restitution are deeply healing to the victim and enable us to do better in the future.<sup>47</sup> Too often, as seen in David’s confession in Psalm 51, our apologies and our efforts at change bypass the very people we have harmed. And as in David’s story, this leads to the continuation of the same harmful and dehumanizing patterns.

One particular way in which churches prioritize the abuser over the victim is exemplified at the beginning of this paper. We emphasize a demand that victims forgive their abusers and shame victims for their on-going trauma while ignoring the need to hold abusers accountable so as not to shame them. This conveys the message that it is a worse sin to be a wounded victim than it is to harm another person. As I have examined our teachings on forgiveness, I have consistently found cognitively dissonant teachings. Cognitive dissonance is an important term, especially for those studying abuse and trauma. It refers to “the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioral decisions and attitude change.”<sup>48</sup> For example, Olusola and Ogunlusi spend one paragraph on the need for victim forgiveness. They begin with the thesis that forgiveness is important. Their first two subpoints, however, state that forgiveness teachings can be deeply hurtful to victims. Their third point suggests that the pastor assure the victim of God’s love and God’s assumption of the guilt of the abuser and the community’s support. Their conclusion reiterates the importance of victim forgiveness.<sup>49</sup> I find it interesting that two of their three points undercut their thesis, yet they don’t question that

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<sup>44</sup> Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair*, 97–114.

<sup>45</sup> Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair*, 107.

<sup>46</sup> Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair*, 108–109.

<sup>47</sup> Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair*, 106–107.

<sup>48</sup> *New American Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. “Cognitive dissonance,” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>49</sup> Olusola and Ogunlusi, “Recurring Cases of Child Rape in Nigeria,” 64.



Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

thesis. I agree with them that rushing to forgiveness is harmful to victims. It takes responsibility away from the abuser who caused the harm and places it on the victim who received the harm. This places a heavy burden on the back of someone who has, essentially, been brutally whipped. Luke 17:3 states, “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them.” Our first focus must be on abuser repentance and on teaching what true repentance looks like. As Ruttenberg noted above, if those who have caused harm truly take the time to hear the victim’s story and examine their own sinful beliefs and actions and make restitution, then forgiveness will follow. After the healing process of justice, forgiveness will become an easy yoke to bear rather than a heavy burden on a bloody back.

Gerrie Snyman states, “a hermeneutic of vulnerability is imperative for a perpetrator in order to enable him or her to become more response-able and responsible to those who are still bearing the marks of apartheid.”<sup>50</sup> The same is true of molestation. For both the molester and those who enabled the molester, the vulnerability of grief and shame for their harmful actions and dehumanizing attitudes is a necessary step toward wholeness. Too often in the church, we demand “grace” in response to molesters and their enablers, a grace that silences the victim and allows those who caused harm to bypass the harm they caused. I offer Zechariah 12:10 as a more righteous example of grace.

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

Zechariah promises those who have committed harm a “spirit of grace and supplication” which will enable them to look upon those they have harmed and overflow with grief. This is true grace. As Snyman explains, “as long as the latter remains ideologically committed to the victim’s lack of humanity” the memory of the committed “atrocities will only keep on haunting the perpetrator.”<sup>51</sup> We must realize that “release from guilt can be measured by a person’s ability to bear the reality of victim’s suffering. As long as the victim’s humanity is denied, no release takes place.”<sup>52</sup> We must not quench the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who have caused harm by offering them a grace which bypasses the harm they have caused, and which ignores the humanity and the needs of their victims.

As we have seen, our children need safety from the rains. The molestation of children is widespread around the world. Yet the church has no safety to offer

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<sup>50</sup> Gerrie Snyman, “A Hermeneutic of Vulnerability: Redeeming Cain?,” 636–637.

<sup>51</sup> Snyman, “A Hermeneutic of Vulnerability,” 653.

<sup>52</sup> Snyman, “A Hermeneutic of Vulnerability,” 653.

Ruth Barron

**The Rain Reveals the Leaks: How the Vulnerability  
of the “Least of These” Reveals the Vulnerabilities in our Own Hearts and Systems**

children because our roof is riddled with leaks. We have relied on the presumption that our roof is secure rather than regularly inspecting our churches both during the dry season, with a goal toward finding and addressing the holes which are developing before the rains arrive, and during the rainy season, with the goal of ensuring that we have done the work well. This failure to inspect the roof of the church has created the conditions necessary for abuse to flourish in our churches. Furthermore, when the rains have revealed the leaks we failed to repair, rather than addressing those leaks, the church has blamed the victims and placed the burden of preventing their own abuse on them, essentially handing them an umbrella and telling them to hold it over their heads. This is ineffective. Our children need true shelter. We have seen that we must address the vulnerabilities in both the hearts of the molesters themselves and in the hearts of those enabling the molesters. We must also address both the immediate sinful actions and the underlying dehumanizing attitudes which caused the actions. This requires accountability for the abusers and enablers and restitution for the victims. Key to this is truly facing the harm we have done to the victims.

I offer a parable intersecting Maasai and Israelite culture as a framework for accomplishing this. As I shared in my recently published piece, “Bitter Roots and Bitter Herbs,”<sup>53</sup> Jewish law commanded the Israelites to include bitter herbs in their Passover celebrations. These herbs were to serve as a remembrance of the bitterness of their captivity in Egypt. God called the Israelites to remember their own bitter captivity as a reminder that they must treat foreigners living among them as “native-born.” The remembrance was to help them see the humanity of those who were easily “othered” in their midst. Maasai women mix bitter leaves with the mud they use to build their houses. These herbs are used to prevent termites from eating away at the wood which gives the house its strength. As we repair the roof of the church, we must be sure to include the bitter herbs of remembrance of the harm we have caused victims in our failure to address molestation and victim dehumanization.

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<sup>53</sup> Ruth Barron, “Bitter Roots and Bitter Herbs.”

Ruth Barron

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