

The Death of Absalom

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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2 Samuel 18:5-17, 18:28-19:8

Over the course of this sermon series, we've seen how the David story is full of rich and complex characters. In the longish Bible passage I'm about to read, three of the most complex and interesting of these characters come together in an intense and emotional way. Those three characters are David, David's general Joab, and David's dashing son Absalom.

Last week when we first met Absalom, he was furious. He was fuming with anger at Amnon his half-brother because Amnon had raped Tamar, Absalom's sister. As I mentioned last week, that anger causes Absalom to murder Amnon, which in turn leads to a rift between him and David, and ultimately that rift turns into a rebellion. Absalom stages a coup. He tries to take over David's throne, and that leads to civil war. David has to flee Jerusalem to survive.

Our story is the climax of the civil war. David's army and Absalom's army meet for battle in the Forest of Ephraim. That's a place north of Jerusalem on the opposite side of the Jordan River. David, who is too old to be on the battlefield, stays behind in the town of Mahanaim. Before he sends out his troops he addresses them and he says to them, "Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake." "Be gentle with him. Even though he has rebelled against me, don't kill him." Here's how the battle unfolds. As I read these passages, notice the contrast between David's approach to the situation and Joab's approach to the situation. Read 2 Samuel 18:5-17, 18:28-19:8.

Let's start with that heart-wrenching scene at the city gate. The troops are returning from the battle in the Forest, and even though they are returning victorious, the mood is somber, because as they arrive in the city they hear the sound of a man crying. As they come into the city they hear the sound of a man pouring out his grief, and it is their king. "Absalom, Absalom! My son, my son. If only I had died instead of you, O Absalom my son." However cheerful the soldier's conversation might have been as they approached the city, they fall silent at the sound of their king's grief. They walk through the gate of the city like we walk through the doors of a funeral home for a visitation – sober, quiet, and maybe a little uncertain. Even as the troops pass quietly beneath him, the king's grief continues to pour out of him: "O my son Absalom! Oh Absalom, my son my son." David is so sad he can't really form a sentence; all he can do is say the name of his dead son over and over and over again.

Joab hears David weeping, he sees the reaction of his soldiers, and it makes him angry. He goes into the chamber where David is crying out and he says, "Snap out of it man! Pull yourself together! Stop being so weak! You're the king!" "These men have given everything for you and you're weeping over our enemy! If you keep showing this weakness, if you keep showing this sentimentality, you will lose these men!" Joab rebukes his king.

Is Joab right to rebuke David? I think how you answer that question will determine how you hear this story. Is Joab right to rebuke David? Is Joab right when he calls David's tears a dangerous weakness? Or are David's tears good and fine? Are you on the side of David's tears, or Joab's rebuke?

To answer that question, we need to take a closer look at the third character in this story: Absalom. Just like all the other characters in the David stories, there is more to Absalom than you remember from Sunday School. Based on your Sunday School classes, what's the first thing you think of when you think of Absalom? The hair, right? Those long flowing locks. Absalom had magnificent flow. The Bible says that when he cut it, his hair weighed 5 pounds.

But Absalom is more than a haircut. David's son is a man of enormous talent and strength. Absalom has soul. You'll remember that last week, Absalom was the only one who really stood up for his sister after her rape. David did nothing. Absalom brought her into his home and comforted her. Even though the subsequent

murder of his brother was a bad thing, at least he was interested in getting some kind of justice. He even names his own daughter Tamar after his shamed sister, which is a really nice thing to do. "Sister, I am not ashamed of you! I love you so much I'm naming my daughter after you!" Absalom's a man of deep feeling and deep passions. He's got soul.

And, yes, he also has great hair. Absalom is a beautiful man. The Bible makes that clear too. "In all Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his appearance as Absalom, from the top of his head to the sole of his feet, there was no blemish on him." You might say that, with his magnificent physique, he put the Abs in Absalom.

So he's beautiful, he's passionate, he's caring – and he's charming too. Do you know how Absalom used to greet people? Chapter 15 tells us. Whenever someone would come up to Absalom and start to bow before him because he was a royal prince, Absalom would grab him by the hand and pull him in and kiss him. He'd pull him in for a bro hug. "Hey friend! You don't need to bow to me! Bring it in! We are brothers!" It's no wonder everyone loved him.

Charisma, beauty, soul – Absalom was a golden boy. And then he fell. He became a rebel. What caused that rebellion? Hard to say. It could be the way he cultivated hate for Amnon. It could be his simmering resentment of his Father – he lived in exile from his Father for years. It could be his pride and ambition. Whatever it was, he used his powers to rebel against his Dad. He started to ride through the city in his chariot and anytime he would run into a person with a complaint or a grievance, he would listen with all his charm, he would nod sympathetically, and then he would say, "You know if I were judge around here, I would make sure you got justice." Over time he built up a following, and the following became a rebellion. And the rebellion turned towards a civil war, and as we heard in our reading, Absalom is defeated. His troops scatter, and Absalom, the golden boy ends up hanging from a tree by his beautiful hair, hanging in midair, strung up between earth and heaven.

And that's where Joab finds him, and, despite David's instructions, that's where Joab runs him through with three javelins. They take his body, they throw it into a pit and they cover it with stones.

Eventually David hears about his son's death and that brings us to the place where we started the sermon: David by the city gate crying out the name of his son over and over again. And it also brings us back the question that we started the sermon with. Whose side are you on? Are you on the side of David's tears or Joab's rebuke? When you read the whole story from chapter 17 through chapter 19, there is a clear contrast drawn between Joab's approach and Joab's attitude, and David's approach and David's attitude. David with his tears, David with his soft-hearted, "Be gentle with Absalom." Joab with his, "get a hold of yourself." Joab with his hard-headed determination to deal decisively with the Absalom problem. Which way seems right to you? The text doesn't give you any helps here. The text doesn't say, "Joab did what was pleasing in the eyes of the Lord," or "David did what was pleasing in the eyes of the Lord." It just tells the story and leaves us to wonder who is in the right.

I will tell you which way I lean: I am on the side of David's tears. I am on the side of David's gentleness and David's tears. And to help explain why that's so, I want you to see how this story parallels another Bible story that you know well, the story of the prodigal son. Notice how the three characters in this story parallel the three characters in the story of the Prodigal Son.

Who does Absalom parallel? The younger son, right? The one who rebels against his Father. The one who takes the inheritance and runs off to the far country. Just like in the parable, the younger son wants his Father to die so he can have his dad's inheritance. If Absalom is like the prodigal, who is like the Father from the parable? David of course. David is a Father too. And just like the Father in the parable, David is waiting at the gate. David is waiting at the gate to see his son come home. I don't know if David would have thrown a party for Absalom and killed the fatted calf, but he clearly would have thrown his arms around him. He wants to be reconciled with the boy. He still loves him.

And then who is Joab like? Joab is like the older brother. You remember the elder son, right? In the parable the elder son gets angry at his Father for showing compassion on his younger brother, for welcoming

him home and throwing a party. He thinks his brother is a no good rebel, so when Dad shows compassion, it's an insult to people like him who's been a loyal and faithful soldier. He's mad at his Father's love for the rebel son and his lack of attention to the faithful son. Compare that to Joab's rebuke of David. "You love those who hate you and hate those who love you! You have made it clear today that those commanders and their men mean nothing to you! I see that you would be pleased today if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead!" He's furious at the father's love for the rebel, and the lack of reward for the faithful ones. Do you hear the similarities?

When it comes right down to it: Both Joab and the older brother are angry about the same thing. Both of them are angry about grace. Grace makes both of them furious. Joab and the elder brother believe in strict accounting. They believe in people getting what they deserve. Both men object strongly to a world where the unworthy are given kindness, and when rebels are offered forgiveness. They believe in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Enemies should be punished; friends should be rewarded. In Joab's world, mercy is for chumps.

That's not David's mindset. Of course there must have been times when David was terribly angry at his boy. I'm sure there were many nights where David thought about what Absalom had done, and said, "That rotten kid! That ungrateful snot! If I ever get a hold of him, I'll throttle him! I'll kill him!" But when it came right down to it, David loved his son. When it comes right down to it, David's reaction to Absalom reminds me of God's reaction to his people's sin in Hosea 11, the passage Kristy read over all of us announcing God's grace to us: "How can I give you up O Israel! All my compassion is aroused!" When it comes right down to it David wants to see his prodigal son's face coming towards him down the road and he wants to run to him with his robes flying in the wind, he wants to throw his arms around the boy and tell him all is forgiven. That's why I side with David's tears because they are full of grace.

In fact, those tears remind me of another Father-child story in the Bible. The story of our relationship with our heavenly Father. Who are we in that story? We are like Absalom. We are the rebels. We are the beloved sons and daughters of God, all of us full of potential, all of us made in the image of God, all of us golden boys and golden girls. But we rebelled against our Father. In our pride. In our ambition.

And what was our Father's reaction. He's angry with us of course. Furious. But what is his ultimate reaction? How does he work out that anger? It's a lot like David's reaction in verse 33: "O Absalom, my son my son, if only I had died instead of you, O Absalom my son." If David could, he would have died for his son. If David could, he would give himself up for the child who rejected him and spit in his face. In Jesus Christ, God does give himself up for all the children who rejected him and spit in his face. God sends his Son to this world and he takes our place, Absalom's place, so instead of us hung on a tree suspended in midair, its Jesus hanging from a tree, run through with three spikes. All for his rebellious children.

"O Absalom, my son my son, would that I had died instead of you." It's not weakness and sentimentality; it is the heart of God. In David's cry you can hear the sound of the grace that saves the world. As we've seen, David is definitely the imperfect anointed. He is a long way from perfect, but I actually think that David's tears at the gate is one of his finest moments. The Bible calls him a man after God's own heart. Never has his heart been closer to God than it is here.

There are many people in this world who would choose Joab's way. There are many people in this world who live by Joab's code. But I will side with the tears of David, and I will take refuge in the grace of my heavenly Father, and I will try to have just a little of His grace live in me.

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