

# “Thoughts on King David: Shepherd, Hero, King, *Grieving Father*”

2 Samuel 18:31-33

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It can help when you study a passage in the Bible to make a list of your basic theological discoveries. Two questions are particularly relevant: (1) What do I learn about God from this text, and (2) What do I learn about being human? From there we ask other questions, “How does this text inform how I am called to live as a Christian? What is it I’m called to be and do? What does this text invite me to consider today?”

That’s where we are headed. But first a summary of the story. Let’s jump in.

Remember what the prophet Nathan told David last week. David had stolen Uriah’s wife Bathsheba. David had murdered him so that he could take Bathsheba as his very own. Nathan confronted David and had promised in the aftermath of David’s tryst with Bathsheba: *there will be trouble within your own house* (II Samuel 12:10). And there are.

We read in 2 Samuel chapter 13 how Absalom was angry over the rape of his beloved sister Tamar. He was so angry that Absalom had the culprit murdered; that man, Amnon, was Absalom’s oldest brother, next in line for David’s throne.

After the murder, Absalom fled Jerusalem for three years. But the scripture tells us that David yearned for his son daily (II Samuel 13:38; 14:39). Joab saw this and arranged for Absalom’s return. (Read about the woman from Tekoa in Chapter 14). Absalom came. But King David wouldn’t see David for two whole years. At the end of chapter 14, the King absolves Absalom with a single kiss. If we think this painful estrangement is over, we are thinking wishfully. It is not.

At the beginning of chapter 15 we find Absalom setting about to steal the king’s throne. Whatever reconciliation has occurred, it is too little, too late. Absalom begins to steal the hearts of Israel. He connived, got rumors going, and set himself up as King of Israel right under David’s nose (15:7ff).

Having lost his grip on Israel, David fled Jerusalem with his faithful generals and soldiers.<sup>[1]</sup>

There is intrigue, spies, double agents, back stabbing, people speaking out of both sides of their mouths, and then a trap. David was a wise warrior with good generals. He lured Absalom and his army into the forest of Ephraim where King David’s army, divide into three parts, slaughtered the less-skilled men of Absalom.

Fighting not only for his crown but his life, David asked his generals to go easy on Absalom.

Joab would have none of that, so when Absalom gets his head tangled up in a tree, Joab thrust three spears into Absalom’s heart. Then, Joab’s ten amour-bearers surrounded Absalom and struck whatever life was left in him out.

Absalom is dead.

And the king’s heart broke. The poet Keats describes where David finds himself: “. . . on the shore of the wide world I stand alone.” David stood alone and fell apart upon that shore. *O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom.*

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That's the story. Here are eight observations.

- I.) Theological observation #1: Sin and brokenness exist in all human families.

David's family puts the "fun" in "dysfunction." I don't mean to make light of that dysfunction and illness, but I do mean to identify it for what it is. From the seduction of Bathsheba and the rape of Tamar, to Absalom's unbridled greed, David's family-system is a wreck.

Every family is touched by dysfunction at various junctures. That's one of the lessons learned from this passage. We don't need to be ashamed that our families don't look like some perfect television version of "family." Despite our efforts and hopes, our family doesn't always function well—or at all.

Sin and brokenness exist in all families.

- 2.) Theological observation #2: Sin is trouble, and it leads to more trouble.

In the story of Absalom we see what blind ambition, greed, and dishonesty will get you. Maybe our white lies and little hatreds aren't as bad as leading military coup, but our sins do create *trouble for our house*.

- 3.) Theological observation #3: Sin is "nature" and "nurture."

This story invites us to ask a question: Where did Absalom learn to be so brazenly greedy? Where did Absalom first see someone drunk on power? Who taught Absalom such little regard for moral law?

One easily could say Absalom learned it all from the best: his own father, King David. In this case, it appears the apple does not fall far from the tree.

In David's grief, we imagine that David is not just weeping over the death of Absalom but also over David's own moral failures as both a king and a father. This vicious cycle of sin perpetuating itself gets us dizzy.

- 4.) Theological observation #4: Grief is heavy, holy, and hard.

We learn something about the power of grief from this passage. *My son, my son Absalom!* David expressed his grief. He let his grief out. We may learn much about grief from this passage, but this is one lesson: Keep grief inside, or delay grief too long, and it will hurt your soul.

- 5.) Theological observation #5: Love is heavy, holy, and hard.

We learn something here about the power of love, particularly the power of a parent's love. Like David, we love our children even when they do rotten things. David loved Absalom even though Absalom tried to kill David, even though Absalom was poisoned by greed and a lust for power, even though Absalom couldn't be trusted, even though Absalom divided loyalties among the king's followers. David loved Absalom.

A parents' love is complicated and powerful

- 6.) Theological observation #6: Don't put reconciliation off.

This text invites us to ask a question. What if Absalom had greater and closer access to David's love sooner? When Absalom came back to Jerusalem from exile, he lived there for two years before David even saw him; Absalom wanted to see his father, his father refused.

If we had the power to rewrite this story, we'd make this story turn out better by inserting a heartfelt reconciliation at the end of chapter 14. Unfortunately, that reconciliation did not happen. Is this David's fault? The text won't allow us to answer that question, but the text insists that we ask it. What if Absalom had greater and closer access to David's love sooner?

One commentator suggests that "like David, we often learn to love when it is too late . . . One wonders what might have been avoided if David's heart had overflowed with love and forgiveness at an earlier moment rather than with grief . . . after Absalom is [dead]." (p. 1341, *The New Interpreter's Bible* vol. 2).

7.) Theological observation #7: Human power has limits.

David cries out, "If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son." (18:33, NIV). But David can't change places with Absalom.

Frederick Buechner wrote that when David wished he had died instead of Absalom, "he meant it, of course. If he could have done the boy's dying for him, he would have done it. If he could have paid the price for the boy's betrayal of him, he would have paid it. If he could have given his own life to make the boy alive again, he would have given it. But even a king can't do things like that" (as quoted in *ibid*, p. 1341, from Buechner's *Peculiar Treasures*.)

Human power has limits.

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So, there are seven theological affirmations we can make from this powerful, twisted, painful, classic Old Testament story. What do you see in this story? What meaning for your life do you draw from this story?

Let me end with a final observation.

8.) Theological observation #8: In light of this brutal reminder that human power is limited, it is vital to end with this affirmation: Human power is limited, but God's power is not.

In the case of this story, we are reminded that we can love our children, but we can't save them.

Fortunately, God can.

And God does.

Thanks be to God that God's love transcends the limits that tie us up and that hold us down. Thanks be to God, indeed.

AMEN.

*Note: The essays from Bruce C. Birch in The New Interpreter's Bible commentary series were helpful. Birch is Dean Emeritus and former Professor of Old Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC.*

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[1] (It is noted in 15:16 that David left behind 10 concubines to take care of his house in his absence, which suggests that he planned to come back.)