



Do You Really Know the King?

A Study in Samuel

David and the Rebellion

2 Samuel 15:1-22

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith

on Sunday, November 6th, 2022

Catching Up with David and Absalom

For those of us who have been on this journey through the books of 1 and 2 Samuel since April, we have seen the story of God establishing David as king of Israel. God used Samuel to establish the monarchy. Samuel anointed Saul as the first king. Saul was unfit and, in his rebellion, he rejected the boundaries that God placed on the role of king. Samuel then anointed David as the second king of Israel. The Bible tells us that David was a man after God's own heart. He would honor God and eventually ascend to the throne. He had great successes, and the Scripture celebrates the early and golden days of the monarchy up through the first ten chapters of the second book of Samuel.

However, things are spiraling out of control. David has sinned against the Lord. He brought a married woman into his bed and then had the husband murdered in order to cover up his sin.

God had promised David an eternal reign in that someone from David's line would always sit on the throne. But after getting rebuked by God, David is no longer living under God's smile. He is living under God's discipline and judgment. God told David that evil would rise up against David from within David's own house. And we see that in the account of Amnon and Tamar and now we see that continue with Absalom.

Absalom, David's third son, has killed the firstborn, Amnon. Absalom was in exile for three years in his maternal grandfather's kingdom. In chapter fourteen, we see his return arranged and David kisses him and welcomes him home. However, Absalom never repents for what he did to Amnon.

2 Samuel placed Absalom on the radar for us at the beginning of chapter thirteen. The two chapters that followed lead to what is happening in fifteen. Absalom is a patient man. He waited to years to get his revenge on Amnon for what Amnon did to Absalom's sister, Tamar.

He waited in exile for three years before returning to Jerusalem. Upon his return, he waits another two years to finally get to see David. And even though that meeting ends with a kiss from David, we understand that there is still significant issues between Absalom and his father. (read text)

In The Course of Time

Chapter fifteen opens with a phrase connecting the impending revolt to Amnon, Tamar, David, Bathsheba, Uriah, Absalom's exile and David's restoring Absalom back into Jerusalem. We also get a glimpse into the heart of Absalom. After Absalom receives some small reconciliation with David, he goes out and gets himself a chariot, horses, and further enlists fifty men to run before him.

Absalom is beefing up his image. In a season of election, we should be used to people taking extreme measures to improve their "brand", so to speak. But this is not putting on appearances. Absalom is up to something. He's got the kingship in his sights. For those of us who have been spending time with these two books, perhaps we recall all the way back to 1 Samuel 8. It was in that chapter with Samuel the prophet warns against a king. The people demanded a king. Samuel was not supportive at all. His warning to them? "You are going to get some king who will take your sons and your daughters and force them to run in front of his chariots and his horses. This king will be just like all the other pagan kings that surround Israel!"

Samuel declared a warning and Absalom seems to be the exact type of person who Samuel warned about. We read Psalm 20:7 and cannot help but think about how Absalom falls short of that verse: "Some take pride in chariots, and others in horses, but we take pride in the name of the Lord our God."

A Claim on the Throne

Absalom is claiming royal status here in the very least. These were kingly accessories.¹ It is clear that Absalom is out to usurp his father's throne. He is carrying himself like a king does. Chariots. Horses. Men accompanying him. Absalom is everything a person would look for in a king.

¹ P. Kyle McCarter Jr. *2 Samuel*. (New York: Doubleday, 1984), p.356.

And the people can buy Absalom being royalty. He was handsome, had almost perfect features. He had a unique head of hair. He looked like people thought a king should look and has begun acting like a king should act.

Absalom sets about establishing support for his leadership. He would go out and stand on the way to the city gate leading into Jerusalem. That was the place that the king was to go and provide judgments for people who were seeking out legal answers. He would intercept people on their way to get help. And there he would ask them questions. “Where are you from? What do you want?” After hearing their explanations, he would encourage them. “Oh, that is a very strong case. Your claims are good and justifiable and even right. Sadly, however, it will be difficult for you to get the resolution that you are seeking because the king doesn’t have anyone here to judge your issue. If only I were appointed judge in the land, then I could help you. Because you deserve it. Come on, bring it in!” He would then embrace them and kiss them.

Did you see how sneaky a snake this patient, scheming Absalom is? He didn’t come right out and say, “You should make ME king instead of my dad.” He says that things would be better if he were *the judge*. However the king is supposed to judge. He is a clever one, Absalom.

He lets them know that if he were the judge, he would be able to settle all of their issues fairly and quickly. If Absalom were in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, he would be breaking into the song, “If I Were the King of the Forest.” We read that Absalom did this over a period of a few years.

It is Absalom’s opinion that David no longer fulfills his responsibility to provide justice for his people. This is so effective that Absalom begins *receiving* anyone coming to him. They are not viewing Absalom as a crown prince, but as a king. Verse 5 tells us that they are paying homage to Absalom. He fawns over them too. He is affectionate, caring, and shares a warmth with the people as though he were king rather than David.

Deception

By doing this, the Bible tells us that Absalom “stole the hearts of the men of Israel.” Let’s clarify a bit what this means. Because this phrase is the theme of the early part of this chapter.

Our English uses of “heart” might lead us mistakenly down the wrong interpretive road. We might read this phrase and think that Absalom had the ability to generate a warm fondness from the Israelites. It can sound as if Absalom has that rare ability to attract the affections of the people of Israel here. But in this context and in at least one other similar expression in the Old Testament, this idiom is not positive.² It isn’t even neutral.

The “heart” in Old Testament Hebrew is often the location of one’s intellect as well as one’s emotions.³ So, rather than win the affections of the Israelites, Absalom stole their minds.

He duped them. He tricked them. He deceived them. Absalom shows his rebellious efforts here to deceive and distort in order to overthrow David. After four years of this distortion, of this charade of acting like the king, he is now ready to instigate open rebellion against his father the king. Absalom is as patient and calculated in his rebellion against David as he was in revenge against Amnon.

Absalom goes to David and lies to him about some vow made with God during the exile that took Absalom to his grandfather’s kingdom. “If the Lord really brings me back to Jerusalem, I will worship the Lord in Hebron.” This is the only time that Absalom will mention the Lord’s name in Scripture, and he does so deviously. He basically takes the Lord’s name in vain here. He has no intention of worshiping the Lord. But he is using the Lord’s name as a lie, a cover up. When we use the Lord’s name deceptively, we are taking it in vain.

David does not seem to be aware of anything sneaky. He sends him away to Hebron (per Absalom’s request) by telling him to “go in peace.” That is ironic. Absalom has no intention of going “in peace.” He had to be aware that a revolt would at some point mean violence. He isn’t going “in peace.”

² In Genesis 31:20, Jacob “stole the heart” of Laban, which is translated by many modern translations as “deceived.”

³ “Heart” (*lebah* and *leb*) is the particular place of a variety of emotions as well as of thought. The term translated as “soul” or “living being” (*nepes*) can also serve as the seat of emotions. The plural form of “kidneys” and other words can for innards can also serve as the place of emotion and affection. Generally speaking, the Israelites associated emotions physiologically as follows: Anger was located in the head (esp. the nose and mouth), a range of emotions in the heart, and distress in the innards or liver. See Mark S. Smith, “The Heart and Innards in Israelite Emotional Expressions: Notes from Anthropology and Psychobiology,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 427-36, esp. 434.

A DIY Kit for Rebellion

Absalom manipulates. He places himself as the king. He acts like he is in control and not David. He distorts and twists things and over time, all of these rebellious seeds are sewn, and he is completely consumed by this rebellion. As we read through this story, we see everything we need to understand what happens in our hearts when we sin. Absalom's actions are rebellious conniving here in the Hebrew text. And our sin is the same. Sin is the conniving action of a rebellious heart looking to take control of everything in a life.

True, we understand that Absalom's rebellion are related to the aftermath of David's sin of adultery and murder. But we cannot ignore that Absalom has been unfaithful to God and is in rebellion. Absalom abuses his power in disregarding the king. Further, Absalom displaces the king and acts like the king himself. We do the same in our selfish sinfulness. We are unfaithful, rebellious. We replace the Lord as the king of our hearts and act like we are in control instead.

Sinful rebellion is purposeful and willful act of ignoring and defying God. Augustine wrote that sin involves a turning "away from the universal whole to the individual part."⁴ Rebellion is a rejection of the greater and more desirable whole in order to satisfy the longings of the individual.

That is as good a definition of sin as I've come across. When we knowingly, willfully, actively sin, we are defying the desirable whole plan for life as laid out in Scripture for God's people. We choose to place ourselves as more important than anyone else instead.

And we will distort the truth to convince ourselves and even others that we are doing is acceptable. We will lie and deceive. Temptation will offer us ways to take control and use our own power and efforts to make ourselves feel better. And that idea is so pleasing to our sinful selves that we justify it away. We may even throw God's name around a bit if it helps us.

Rebellion is a distortion of our calling. We convince ourselves that "it is easier to be God than to love God."⁵ It is easier to control people than to love people. It is easier to please yourself than to serve others.

⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 12.14

⁵ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p.58-59.

And don't forget, this rebellion of Absalom is connected to David's sin back in chapter eleven. As we consider the full weight of sin, we are constantly reminded that our sin doesn't just affect us. Sin or sometimes the consequences of sin splashes over onto others. There are a lot of innocent lives that are devastated by the sin of David, Amnon, and Absalom. This revolt will upend the entire nation. Every life in Israel will be impacted by Absalom's revolt.

Absalom's rebellion – and ours too – asks again that overarching question of 1 and 2 Samuel: Who is suitable to be the Messiah? Not David. Certainly not Absalom. And you and I are too rebellious and sinful to deliver ourselves from sin. However, this text points to the One who is the suitable Messiah.

In verse 30, as David retreats from Absalom, he travels through the Kidron Valley and up the Mount of Olives. We are reminded of Jesus's Maundy Thursday walk to the Mount of Olives before his arrest that leads to the cross. Jesus is the suitable Messiah because, despite that painful trip and the impending crucifixion, Jesus never puts the individual part before the desirable whole. David and Absalom and you and I will, at some point, put the individual front and center.

But not Jesus. Jesus faithfully died on the cross for our rebellious sin. The question is not "what do you want?" The question is "what do you need?" And the answer is clear. Because of our rebellion, we need Jesus.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT:

When you think of rebellion, what stories, movies, or moments of history do you think about?

Why is it appropriate to consider sin as being rebellion against God?

Absalom was a patient, calculating individual. And as the gulf grew between he and his father, David, he put plans in place to usurp the throne. Have you seen the consequences of allowing hurt feelings and relationship troubles to fester rather than deal with them biblically? What steps should have been taken in this process of reconciliation by both David and Absalom?

In what ways does this story of Absalom remind us of David's sin?

This section of 2 Samuel consistently points out the weight and serious nature of our sin. Some aspects of this entire narrative – beginning with David and Bathsheba and running through Absalom's rebellion – cause modern readers trouble. We struggle with all of the "collateral damage" in these stories. Consider over the course of several chapters the lives of people hurt by the sin of others. What does that reveal to us about our sin?

Henri Nouwen wrote that it seems "easier to be God than to love God." In what ways do you agree or disagree with that statement?