

CHAPTER 8: REBELLION

THE BIG PICTURE

Sin and shame have been writing the story of David's royal court, and David hasn't done anything about it. Crippled by the shame due to the sin of his past, the king has not been himself. His family has fallen apart because of rivalry and discord. The kingdom is suffering because of the chaos. Sin leads to more sin, violence leads to more violence. The cycle needs to be interrupted. Absalom, next in line to succeed his father as king, is in exile because he murdered his brother Amnon in retaliation for Amnon's rape of Tamar. With all this drama, people are beginning to question if David has what it takes to run the kingdom if he cannot lead his own family. Someone has to stop the cycle of sin. As readers, we are waiting expectantly for David to step up to the challenge and get back into proper alignment with the authority of God. ***It will not be easy, because the king is about the face the greatest challenge of his life.*** For this episode, familiarize yourself with **2 Samuel chapters 14-18**. The events of the last few episodes converge to form an epic conflict that emerges from within David's own family. Absalom's return from exile exposes deep fissures remaining in the social fabric of David's court. These cracks began to spread and the fracture only grew deeper with time. Eventually, the rift between father and son divided the kingdom with dire consequences.

ENTER THE STORY:

- I. This section begins with David's family in disarray. Any parent can easily imagine how the king's heart is torn in two. On the one hand, Absalom his son is estranged and the king's heart longs to have him home. On the other hand, Absalom has murdered his brother and should be held accountable. The king is torn between mercy and justice. To complicate the matter further, David has received God's mercy himself for a similar crime. When Joab moves to break the stalemate, he does so by trapping the king with a well told story just like Nathan the prophet did in chapter 12. The wise woman of Tekoa begged that mercy be shown to her son for killing his brother, so her last remaining heir would not be taken from her. When David agreed with her logic, she exposed his hypocrisy in keeping Absalom in exile. After all, God is one who "devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him."
 - What would you do if one of your own children committed a crime against another one of your children? Imagine the conflicting emotions you would feel.
 - How do you think the king could best fulfill his obligations with regard to justice in this matter? How do you think they king could best fulfill his obligations to mercy?

- Think about the way God must feel when we sin against each other. One of God’s dearly loved sons or daughters is harming another of his children! Write some thoughts about how God might process this.
 - In **2 Samuel 14:14**, the woman from Tekoa is talking about Absalom but she is talking to David. David has been acting like a person “banished” since his sin with Bathsheba. Sin has been writing the story, and David hasn’t done anything about it! She is hinting at a double meaning: David, too, needs to return to God’s grace. He needs to leave his self-imposed exile. God doesn’t want his children estranged from him. How is David’s act of mercy toward Absalom a step toward God’s grace?
- II. There are two factors under the surface that create tension between David and Absalom, creating the conditions for sedition to grow in Absalom’s heart. The first is the unresolved conflict that acts like a wedge between father and son. David struggles to forgive Absalom for the death of Amnon. Even after Absalom is welcomed home, he is not allowed in the king’s presence. Absalom resents his father, feeling justified in what he did. For two years, the chasm between them grows in silent bitterness. The second factor is Absalom’s deficient character. Read **2 Samuel 14:25-27**. The author paints a picture of Absalom as vain and shallow. As the narrative progresses, Absalom proves to be a person whose gifts exceed his integrity. He is someone with charisma but not conviction. He is attractive, intelligent, and ambitious; but he is not a moral person. This is a dangerous mix in the heart of someone placed in a position of prominence.
- Offense has a tendency to grow when not addressed, yet people often choose to ignore it and hope it goes away. Read **Matthew 18:15-17** and **Ephesians 4:26**. With the story of David and Absalom in mind, what should they have done to heal the rift between them? Why do you think the bible warns against ignoring anger and offense?
 - Do you know anyone whose talents and gifts are not matched with the requisite amount of character? What makes this such a volatile combination?
 - David could certainly recognize the character deficiencies in his son. What do you think the king should have done about it, if anything? How can a parent influence his or her adult children?
- III. **2 Samuel 15:1-6** details Absalom’s conspiracy to undermine his father and elevate himself. He plays the part of the king in the eyes of the people. He has fallen to the temptation all gifted people face when they are under authority: he thinks he could do better than the one currently in leadership. In our culture of ambition and ruthless competition, it is easy to understand Absalom’s feeling and behavior. We are accustomed to stories of hostile take overs and upstarts grabbing for control. He is

undoubtedly comparing his strengths to his father's weaknesses. Absalom's self-assertion as a judge is a direct attack on the ability of his father. He is manipulating the people so popular opinion will tip in his favor. It is easy to tip the scales when he starts with people that are already unhappy or have some grievance or offense. Mutiny like this often starts in the gutter. Complaint becomes insubordination, which grows into rebellion. Absalom plots and schemes and maneuvers politically for four years.

- How is Absalom's behavior rightly called "stealing?" What did he steal? Do you think he recognized what he was doing was wrong?
- How is Absalom's story a warning against ambition? How are you dealing with the selfish ambition in your own heart? Are you guilty of rebellion against legitimate authority or undermining those over you?
- Why do you think Absalom lusted for power? Why wasn't he content with his position as a son of the king?
- Is there a right or appropriate way to "get ahead" in the world? In other words, is there such a thing as *healthy* ambition? What does it look like?
- How should you rightly handle complaints and grievances with those in leadership? Is there a way to disagree with or challenge leaders that honors God's kingdom?

IV. Absalom's conspiracy is so well planned; David has no choice but to flee. Fearing for their lives, David leads a group of faithful subjects, loyal servants, and true friends out of Jerusalem. Read **2 Samuel 15:30**. David's journey up the Mount of Olives, barefoot and weeping, is one of the most poignant pictures in the books of Samuel. Jerusalem, the City of David, is at his back and an uncertain future is ahead. David leads a parade of refugees as he flees from his own son. As he approaches the summit, which provides a panoramic view of the city, David learns that one of his chief advisors has defected to Absalom's side. This is a crushing blow to David, who is reminded that Ahithophel is the grandfather of Bathsheba. This is the moment when David reaps the harvest of pain that was sown in sin. Yet David emerges from this moment with clarity. This is a centering moment where David reflects on what God has done and remembers the long journey they have walked together. David makes several choices that illustrate his surrender to the will of God. First, he sends the Ark of the Covenant and the priests back to Jerusalem. David resists the temptation to use God's priests or God's presence for his political gain (something Absalom had done in **2 Samuel 15:8**). Second, refuses to retaliate with violence to the taunts and abuses of Shimei. This man threw rocks and dirt on the king's procession as they walked their sorrowful road. David accepted these insults without repaying them with evil. These gestures say loudly: "My fate is God's to decide, I choose to trust Him."

- Read **2 Samuel 15:16-18**. Many of the men and women who march past David have been aligned with David from the beginning. What do you think is going through David's mind when these faithful few march past him?
 - **2 Samuel 16:1-14** details the taunts and abuses of Shimei, who kicks the king while he is down. Do you think you could endure such insults at a time of great stress? What do you find inspiring about David's actions?
 - This story illustrates the spiritual truth that people reap what they sow. David's sin with Bathsheba has long reaching consequences, including the crisis of this narrative. How have you seen the domino effect of sin in your own life, where unresolved sin leads to more sin?
- V. When David learns of Ahithophel's defection, he prays that God would intervene. His prayers are answered in the form of Hushai, a friend of David sent back to Jerusalem as a double agent. In addition to Hushai, David's covert intelligence network includes the tabernacle priests and their families. **2 Samuel 16 and 17** tell the story of the clash of counselors. Ahithophel is legendary for his wisdom, so Hushai's talk is a difficult one. The advice of the two counselors is a contrast between action and caution. Ahithophel advises immediate action: strike while David is vulnerable and off guard. Hushai brilliantly reminds Absalom of the battle prowess of David and his elite guard, arguing that only a well-planned and perfectly executed assault can hope to defeat such seasoned warriors. The reader knows just how exposed David is, and that Ahithophel's advice is the better course for Absalom, but Absalom doesn't know that! Mustering all the troops will take time, a gift that Hushai hopes to give the true king! Hushai's rhetoric wins. This is a major accomplishment and a huge turn of events. The author points out that God is behind this development: "For the Lord had determined to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel." Note the thrilling espionage story as the messengers make their way to David and dodge their pursuers.
- This battle of the minds precedes the physical battle, but has a dramatic impact on the outcome. What do you note about the way God accomplishes his purpose in this story?
 - Note the way that Hushai subtly plays on Absalom's pride to control the usurpers reactions. He manages to manipulate Absalom into leading the attack on David himself. Why do you think pride leaves such "blind spots" in a person's judgment? Have you ever made a foolish decision because of pride or bravado?
 - Once Ahithophel was defeated, he recognized there was no future for him if David regained the throne. He hanged himself. Can you think of another person that hanged himself after betraying a "son of David?" What do the characters of Ahithophel and Judas Iscariot have in common?

VI. The battle is recorded succinctly in **2 Samuel 18**. One of the themes of this story is the conflict between youth and experience. Absalom is convinced he can rule better than his aging father and that it is time for the younger generation to enjoy power. David and his men might be legendary, but they are aging. This theme plays out in the battle between the forces of Absalom and the forces of David. David's special guard was a standing army of professional soldiers. This group traces its existence all the way back to the Cave of Adullam where David trained them personally. They are very different from the armies of Israel, now led by Absalom, which is made up of the men of fighting age conscripted into service. Many of them are likely young and ambitious upstarts like Absalom himself. One group is comprised of professional, full-time soldiers with many years of combat experience. The other group is made up of farmers, craftsmen, and tradesmen that have been drafted into service. The latter is more numerous, but the former are better trained. In this battle, experience wins. David's men pick a battleground that favors their experience and nullifies Absalom's numbers advantage. The manner of Absalom's death underscores his misplaced pride. In such terrain, riding a mule would be impractical. The young king is more concerned about pomp and pageantry than practicality. His pride and foolishness leaves him hanging from a tree, completely at the mercy of Joab and his men. Not the way Joab again takes matters into his own hands contrary to the command of David, killing Absalom and ending the rebellion. Absalom legacy is the monument he built to himself, a fitting sentiment to enshrine his empty pride.

- Think about the way the author highlights the folly of Absalom's pride throughout the story. He was seeking glory and prominence, but he only received disaster. Why is pride such a dangerous sin? What mistakes have you made because of selfish pride?
- Joab took matters into his own hands and killed Absalom. Do you think Absalom needed to die? Why or why not? Is Joab guilty of rebellion because he disobeyed the king's orders?
- Absalom repaid the mercy of David with rebellion, and yet David was still seeking a way out of this conflict without harming Absalom. Read **Romans 5:8**. Think about how David's intentions reflect the heart of God toward sinful humanity. Spend a few minutes thinking about your own tendency toward spiritual rebellion.