

H. Michael Brewer
Crescent Springs Presbyterian
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THE STORY OF A GREAT MAN II Samuel 18:31-33

Let me tell you a story about a man, a great man who was a king and a father—in that order. The man's name was David, and his ascent to the throne of Israel was long and arduous. We haven't time to review how David was secretly anointed king by the prophet Samuel, or the years that David hid like a criminal in the Judean desert, or laid low among the Philistines, sometimes even feigning madness in order to protect himself. Eventually Saul, the reigning king, was killed in battle, and David settled down for awhile in Hebron, where he was crowned king over the southern kingdom of Judah.

At Hebron David's first son Amnon was born. There was a second son who apparently died at an early age, and then came the third son Absalom. Those were busy years for David when his boys were growing up, because David ended up going to war with Saul's supporters in the northern kingdom. But David was a skilled warrior and a shrewd politician. By the time he was thirty, David was king over the united kingdom of Israel.

Then the really hard work began: forging a loose group of tribes into a true nation, winning the loyalty of Saul's old friends without estranging David's own supporters in the south, forging a government, bolstering the economy, establishing a new capitol, guarding or extending Israel's borders, drafting treaties, expanding foreign trade...and fathering children. David had at least eight wives and concubines, some that he chose for personal reasons, some for politics, and some to enhance his prestige as king. He had at least thirty sons and unnumbered daughters.

At first glance David seems to have been quite a family man. In fact, he seems to have spent far more time and energy on politics than parenting. Maybe he always intended to spend more time with his kids once he got settled into the throne, but things never did settle down. Not that David's children weren't pampered with the fruits of money and influence. The oldest boys seem to have been particularly favored, Amnon who was the heir apparent to the throne and Absalom who was next in line. The story turns around those two young men.

And it is a story to rival anything you find on the soaps. Amnon fell in love—or lust—with his half sister Tamar. Under the ruse of being sick, Amnon lured Tamar to his quarters. There, all alone, Amnon ignored the pleadings of Tamar and brutally abused his half-sister. Afterward, the weeping Tamar begged Amnon to marry her, but Amnon's love had suddenly turned into loathing. He laughed at her proposal and had his servants cast the dishonored girl into the street. Tamar made her way to the home of her full brother Absalom, and there she lived in perpetual shame.

Hard though it is to believe, David did nothing. Mind you, in those days a father's authority over his children extended well into adulthood, and David was king to boot; he could have done something, but he didn't. Maybe he was ashamed. David knew what it was to succumb to lust, and he too had once used violence to get a woman. It is hard to punish our children for what they have learned from us, and they will learn from us, even

when we're not around much. Or maybe David was too busy, and just never got around to dealing with Amnon. Or maybe David decided to indulge his son one more time. At any rate, David paid a terrible price for his negligence. Absalom, the outraged brother of Tamar, bided his time for two years, kept his anger to himself, and hoped against hope that his father David would do something. Finally Absalom took matters into his own hands. He threw a party, got Amnon drunk, and murdered him. With his brother's blood on his hands, Absalom fled across the border to Geshur.

And again David did absolutely nothing. He did not pursue Absalom to punish him. He did not call him home to beg his son's forgiveness. He did nothing. He did nothing for three years, until his adviser Joab pressured him to let Absalom return. By this time David was deeply, deeply missing his son. Even then David might have been able to salvage his relationship with his son, but once again he fell short as a father. There might have been a reunion, but something in David got in the way: pride, resentment, a grudge, something. David decreed, "Yes, allow Absalom to return to Jerusalem. But he is not welcome in this house. I do not want to lay eyes on him."

Two more years passed before David consented to see Absalom. By then it was too late. Without discipline, without forgiveness, it was too late. Absalom began to plot against his father. For four years Absalom publicly undermined David's authority and gathered an army. All the while David never suspected a thing. Even then, it seems that David had very little time for his son, or else he could not have remained ignorant of Absalom's hatred and Absalom's treason. When Absalom struck, David was taken completely by surprise. David fled for his life, and Absalom marched unchallenged into Jerusalem.

I cannot begin to tell you all the intrigue and espionage that follows Absalom's revolt. But finally we come to the crux of the story. David was waiting in the nearby town of Mahanaim while his generals led the troops to war. As the troops are leaving, David called repeatedly to the generals: "Please try not to hurt Absalom. For my sake, bring Absalom back alive. Please, please, don't hurt my son, Absalom."

The battle took a terrible cost in human lives, but at last the armies of David prevailed and Absalom's revolt was crushed. Absalom himself was fleeing the battle on a mule, when his long hair became entangled in the branches of a tree. When General Joab heard that Absalom was trapped, he rushed to the scene and stabbed him through the heart. Then he dispatched a messenger, a Cushite, to run and carry tidings of the battle to David. And what follows is surely one of the saddest passages in all the scriptures.

"Then the Cushite came, and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For the Lord has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you." The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man." The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

You can't help but wonder where things went wrong with David and Amnon and Absalom. Of course, a great part of the fault lies with the sons themselves. They made their choices, and they had to live and die with the consequences. With even the best parents, children sometimes go wrong.

But David has to shoulder some of the blame, too, because he was far from being the best father. It seems that David gave too little discipline and too little guidance to his sons. Sometimes he showed them too little love and forgiveness. I'm not saying he didn't love them, just that apparently never showed it very much. In the eyes of a child it may amount to the same things. On the whole, I guess David just never gave his children enough attention, enough of his time, enough of himself.

David, after all, was an ambitious man. Working his way to the top, or working to stay on top. Politics, affairs of state... There was a lot to do, and David did it conscientiously and single-mindedly. David was a great man, no doubt about it, and a success. From shepherding a flock of sheep in the countryside, to shepherding all of Israel from the royal capital. No question, David was a world-beater.

But when you envision David after the battle with Absalom, standing there with no son beside him, face twisted with grief, tears running into his beard, pounding his chest and sobbing his son's name over and over like a desperate prayer, you get the feeling that David would have traded it all for a chance to set things right with Absalom. You get the feeling that David maybe would have chucked it all, the victories, the glory, the accolades, the crown, his place in history, all of it, even his very life, just to have Absalom ten years old again and back in his arms.

But you can't turn back time. You can't change the past. You can't reclaim the ill spent hour or the squandered opportunities. And just as you can't change the past, neither can you make any claim on the future. The person who tends to business today and leaves loving for tomorrow will find that tomorrow never gets here. There's only today, with all the choices and pressures and possibilities that fill up a day. That's all you have whether you are a father whose children are growing up fast while you're not around, or a mother, or a husband or a wife, or a grandparent, or a daughter or a son, or a brother or a sister. Today is the day you have to love each other, and show it, and decide what comes first for you.

May God give us the grace to use each day wisely and well, and with God's help may our stories end more happily than David's.

Soli Deo Gloria!