

Rebellion from Within

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

⁵ The king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom.

⁶ So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. ⁷ The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. ⁸ The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.

⁹ Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on... ¹⁵ And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him...

³¹ 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."

³² 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."

³³ 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!"

This week many of us have watched the Tokyo Olympics. Reporters are excited to interview medal winners and their parents. A common theme is often the dedication and sacrifices of the parents on behalf of their child; getting up before day, driving long distances to practice facilities, then getting their child to and from school. These parents are very proud of their child! But what happens when you or your children do the opposite of making you proud? What if your or your child's behavior is a source of embarrassment?

The past few weeks we have been hearing of the life of David. He made great contributions to the institutions of Israel's life, both political and religious, and made his share of mistakes. Today our scripture is of a most painful experience in

David's life, the death of his son Absalom in the forest of Ephraim. The death of Absalom is not a simple case of grief over a dead son. It is the tragic conclusion of a complex story of love and betrayal, forgiveness and heartbreak, political duty and power battles. To understand the event, we need to know a little about David's home life. Domestic life in the house of David as it unfolded over several years was a mess. The child he had fathered with Bathsheba became ill, and although he fasted to stave off the illness, David resumed his habitual life when the child died, as if nothing had happened.

David had a number of other sons by his various wives. David's sons, to put it bluntly, are a mess. They may be heirs to an everlasting promise (2 Sam. 7:8-16), and they may be dazzlingly gorgeous (2 Sam. 14:25), but they are a mess. David's son Absalom had a very beautiful sister, Tamar. Absalom's older half-brother Amnon, David's oldest son by a different wife, lusted after Tamar. Eventually, Amnon gave in to his passion, creates a ruse by asking David to send his half-sister Tamar to comfort him in his illness, tried to seduce Tamar, and ended up raping her. Instead of restoring her honor by marrying her, he discards her. Absalom takes Tamar into his household to protect her, but he does not forgive his half-brother. Absalom was irate that his father did not punish Amnon and took it on himself to render the punishment. Two years later, Absalom creates a ruse, asking King David to send all of his sons to visit him, Absalom, for sheep-shearing festivities. Absalom kills Amnon, heir to the throne, and then flees to Geshur. After three years of mourning, King David's heart goes out to his son Absalom and longs for his return; but family relations do not exist in a vacuum. Joab, David's Machiavellian military commander, recognizes that David's mourning threatens his ability to govern. Through yet another ruse, Joab convinces David to bring Absalom home to Jerusalem; later Absalom wins the forgiveness of his father and is restored to the palace.

Absalom was handsome, intelligent, passionate, and vigorous. He was also ambitious, increasingly alienated from his father, and impatient. He conspired with selected dissidents with old tribal and warlord connections and gathered an army to stage a coup against his father. He got his father to leave the capital by a ruse and seized Jerusalem. David had to fight against them or else be defeated himself (see 2 Sam. 13-18). Today's narrative in 2 Samuel 18 opens with David's army poised for battle against Absalom and the rebel Israelites. (Television miniseries and movies thrive on less dramatic plots!)

David rallied his forces and came back to Jerusalem. Absalom fled, taking David's harem with him. David's army pursued him, and Joab, the faithful general, after a long series of rebellious conflicts, killed Absalom. Oddly, David was simultaneously happy that the rebellion was apparently over and plunged into a deep grief over the death of his son, from which he never quite recovered. The conflicts over succession were not over; they troubled the land for generations.

Most of us do not realize that the Bible tells stories like this. Because we have not heard this story, we may assume the only thing Christian faith has to say about our pain sounds like the sermon preached by Shimei as David trudges out of Jerusalem. We may not remember Shimei but we know his sermon. Shimei curses David, throws stones at him, and tells him that God is giving him exactly what he deserves: "The LORD has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood" (2 Sam. 16:8). But this is not the message here. Shimei does not speak to the sheer anguish of David the king who is also David the father of Absalom.

So, what can we learn from the very sad story:

First, when family discord hits, we often dismiss it easily as part of historical reality when it visits others, but it sends us screaming deep in our guts when

tragedy comes close or hits home. When it comes close or hits home, we are left with no choice but to wrestle with it; yet we often fail to understand its import, not only because we are immersed in our pain, but also because we fail to connect the dots—especially when the dots include the history of our past actions that we want to forget and the consequences of which we are now reaping. However, the past is not past, even if it is not remembered, for it lives in us as individuals—in our ways of thinking and acting.

When those whom we love to suffer, or when what we value is destroyed or taken away from us, our grief reaches to the deepest sea and soars to the highest heaven. In the face of our suffering loved ones, we may, like King David, wish we could suffer on their behalf. Hurting and not knowing what has caused our misery, we raise our anguished cries to the heavens with the posture of a sufferer. **Eleazar S. Fernandez**

At the opening of chapter 18, David musters his troops against Absalom's forces. He himself is prepared to go into battle, but his advisors—including Joab—insist that he remain behind. The king has remained behind in war before, which ended shamefully (2 Sam. 11). This time, David is ordered to stay behind. He agrees but has only one request of them: "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom" (v. 5). Joab perceives that David's divided loyalties threaten the entire nation. In an accident of fate, in the course of battle, Absalom was riding on his mule. As the mule went under some thick branches of a great oak, Absalom's long, beautiful hair became entangled in the branches. The mule continued walking, emerging out from underneath him, and Absalom was left hanging from the branch (v. 9), trapped directly in harm's way. David's troops obey the king's command to protect his son, but Joab takes matters into his own hands and drives three sticks into Absalom's chest. Only then do Joab's armor-bearers finish the task.

In a touching scene, David awaits the news of the outcome of the battle. What would good news mean? It is clear that he desires political victory, but perhaps even more, he desires that his son Absalom live. A Cushite messenger brings what he thinks will be glad tidings to David: the battle against all of David's enemies has been won. The Cushite attributes the success to the Lord, who has now vindicated David by delivering him from the power of all who had rebelled against him. David asks a simple question: "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" David is not as concerned for himself or for his troops as he is for Absalom, even though he has been angry with Absalom for a long time for the murder of Ammon, and even though Absalom has attempted to usurp his throne. The Cushite offers David an indirect answer: "May the enemies of my lord and king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man" (v. 32). In this way, David finds out that Absalom is dead. The king trembles and weeps: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you!" (v. 33).

Few of us will ever have to face the devastating experience confronting David: a son who rapes a daughter and another son who kills his brother and then betrays his father. Few of us will ever be challenged by the tension between loyalty to family and fidelity to country, love for one's child and fulfillment of one's duty. Few will ever be immersed in such political intrigue or military strategy.

The second thing we learn is there are many experiences in King David's narrative to which many of us can relate. Perhaps we have family members—brothers or sisters, parents or children—whom we love and with whom we long for a relationship, yet who disappoint, disavow, or even betray us. Perhaps we have experienced the pain of deep personal yearning for family bonds, and the reality that our political views are so diametrically opposed that we cannot be in the same room together. Perhaps we have experienced a longtime friend or advisor, in whom we placed our confidence and authority, thwart our explicit wishes and betray our

trust. Perhaps we have lost an estranged loved one to death, and we know what it means never to have the opportunity to make amends.

This text might function as a mirror by which we see our own complicated choices. There is no easy resolution; instead, the very complexity invites us simply to acknowledge the consequences of our impulses, which all too often remain invisible to us until after their results have been made apparent. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" ([John 8:32](#)), even when the truth is terribly uncomfortable.

The unresolved grief with which this passage concludes invites us not to try too quickly to settle these tensions. Moreover, the silence of the text concerning moral judgment encourages us not to place blame on one party or another in our own discordant lives. Instead, we are invited to bring all of our reality—painful losses, broken relationships, failed responsibilities, betrayed trust—to the throne of grace. It is God's to determine the outcome of our lives; it is ours to ask for God's mercy.

Christine Chakoian

The story is a story without a happy ending and concludes with a tearful old man weeping alone, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" ([2 Sam. 18:33](#)).

"Would I had died instead of you" is not, however, the kind of bargain life cuts with us. God knows we wish it were different. If only millions in oil and gas contracts could be traded for an untroubled son. If only a mother's happiness could be bargained for some smidgen of happiness for her daughter that does not include handfuls of pills. "I would give anything if I could make it different," we say, but we cannot give everything, and we cannot make it different, and that is David's aching dilemma at the end.

Every parent who has lost a child resonates with these words. These words grasp our hearts tight because we can lose so much, we can hurt so much. If the

Bible does not know about these things—if God does not know about these things—what does it matter? These words stir our hearts, as they have stirred the hearts of people of faith for centuries, because they tell us something about God. At the beginning of these stories the prophet Samuel identifies David, saying, "The LORD has sought out one after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). Here in the grief of "one after God's own heart" the story opens a window to show us God's own heart. That is why the people of God keep telling the stories of David. In David's anguish we see nothing less than the face of God, the God who shares our suffering and loss, the God vulnerable to our tears. Ultimately, at the heart of all things, God is the one who cries, "My son, my son! Would I had died instead of you!" The tears in this story are part not only of the history of David but of all history and every story. **Patrick J. Willson**

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