

Session 6 David's family troubles

David's adultery and its aftermath is followed straightaway by the sad impact it all had on David's family. That impact was the outworking of God's word to David through the prophet Nathan.

David's eldest son commits rape

Amnon, David's eldest son and heir was obsessed with his half-sister Tamar. Yet Israelite law meant he was too close to be permitted a sexual relationship with her (Lev 18:11; 20:17; Deut 27:22).

But with the encouragement of 'wise' Jonadab (13:3) he went ahead and raped her (see Gen 34:2-3,36 for a similar occurrence). This is not godly wisdom, but the world's.

In contrast, Tamar is portrayed as a virtuous woman (compare 13:12 with Gen 34:7). She behaved impeccably compared to all the men in this chapter, and yet she was the one who suffered.

If a man had sexual intercourse with a virgin who was not pledged to be married to anyone, then Israelite law demanded he care for her by marrying her and pay a financial penalty to her father (Ex 22:16-17; Deut 22:28-29). By ordering Tamar out of his house Amnon demonstrated he had no intention of fulfilling either responsibility. Tamar warned him he was making things worse. He didn't care.

Relevance for us: *Like Tamar, we may do everything we can to live a godly life, but that doesn't guarantee we will not get ignored, used, abused, despised, even ruined as she was. But that is not a reason to give up seeking to live righteously. Tamar's virtue was a light to her fellow Israelites, as it still is to us. She alone came out of this as the example to follow, the one we should listen to.*

Fall-out from the rape - Absalom's scheming and David's failure to discipline his sons

Absalom took Tamar under his wing. But he chose, for the time being, to suppress the hate he felt towards Amnon and urged his sister not to dwell on the matter.

David was furious (13:21). What could he do? He could have insisted on applying Dt 22:28-29, but that would have gone against Lev 18:11. A fine of 50 shekels (the price of a small plot of land) would have achieved nothing. Paying it to Tamar's father, David would have been ridiculous.. So, David did nothing.

Why does David not even rebuke Amnon, or urge repentance? Was he too soft on his first-born?

Absalom sat on his hatred for Amnon for 2 years before plotting revenge (13:23-24). He was gambling. If David accepted the invitation, killing Amnon would have been impossible. But he was hoping David would say no, leaving the door open for Absalom's real request, for Amnon to come in David's place.

Note, there is no mention of David consulting the LORD over whether he should go.. He'd been much more cautious about the people of Keilah (1 Sam 23:1-13), but this was family. And David loved his sons.

Absalom managed to persuade his men to seize Amnon and kill him 13:28-29 (remember how David had been so principled about not killing anyone from King Saul's family).

Relevance for us: *We may think we're not as scheming or violent as Absalom, but how many of us may have sat for years on feelings of resentment or anger towards someone else? We may not have turned those feelings into drastic action, but have we allowed them to fester and permanently distort the way we relate to that other person? It is neither healthy for our relationship with them, nor with ourselves. And it is certainly not healthy for our relationship with God. It's time to allow God to bring those feelings out into the light and allow Him to deal with them. If that seems too much, then talk in confidence to one of the clergy about it.*

The judgment of God delivered to David in ch12 about 'the sword not departing from your house' had begun. This was a consequence of David's sin worked out through the will of God.

Absalom fled to Geshur, east of the Sea of Galilee. because his mother, Maacah, was the daughter of Talmai the king of Geshur (1 Chr 3:2). He stayed there for 3 years in self-imposed exile.

David's attitude to Absalom remained negative. According to most English translations, 2 Sam 13:39 says David was consoled regarding the death of Amnon and longed to go to Absalom. The Hebrew is not as clear or positive as that. The verb translated 'longed to' means more like 'had come to an end'/'was used up'. One commentator renders the whole clause as 'the king's enthusiasm for marching out against Absalom was spent.' And there is no verb to 'long for' in 14:1. It actually says Joab knew the king's heart was 'upon' or 'against' Absalom (i.e. he was thinking about him or remained hostile to him).

David reminded of God's character from an unexpected source

Joab used a 'wise' woman from Tekoa to try to persuade David to bring Absalom back from exile..

The woman had the temerity to accuse the king of not following God's ways (14:14). What she said about God's character was true. God desires reconciliation more than judgement as David needed reminding. But God's judgement is the spur to bring about that reconciliation.

Relevance for us: *We often need to be reminded of God's character when it comes to the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation. But we tend to veer towards one of two extremes. Either, like the woman, for the sake of harmony, we want to grant forgiveness too cheaply, with no expectation of repentance and change in the other person. Or, like David, we do not seek reconciliation at all, preferring to hold onto our grudge against them. In either case we ignore the way God deals with sin, grants forgiveness and seeks reconciliation.*

There are difficulties with the woman's story. Her plea relied on her having only had two sons and losing the second meaning her family's inheritance would go to those only distantly related to her. David had many sons and his inheritance would stay within the immediate family whatever happened to Absalom. Also, no one was trying to kill Absalom at this point and his exile was not the result of being banished.

David had become too easily persuadable into following courses of action that were unwise (13:24-27; 14:13-14, 21). He was reacting rather than ruling. He was not seeking God's perspective. Perhaps he accepted it as God's judgment of his failures. But he could and should have stuck to his principles.

Relevance for us: *In our desire for avoiding conflict among family and friends, we too can be tempted to relax rules and values we claim to hold. Going soft to ensure there is peace has its own consequences – and they are often not good ones.*

David agreed to Absalom returning to Jerusalem but would not allow him to see his face – further evidence David was not reconciled with Absalom, but neither would he insist on repentance.

After another two years Absalom persuaded Joab to make a further plea to David, saying '*if* I am guilty of anything, let him put me to death' (14:32). A classic sign of an unrepentant heart, and a phrase beloved by public figures accused of wrongdoing. Not 'I admit what I did was wrong and I'm sorry for the hurt I caused', but 'I'm sorry if people chose to take it that way.' It's an accusation my accusers are too weak and sensitive to cope with real life, with a defiant implication I've no intention of changing my ways.

How different things might have been if at this point Absalom had copied his father in humbly admitting 'I have sinned against the LORD.' (2 Sam 12:13)

Relevance for us: *How often, when challenged about something we've said or done, do we offer only a half-hearted apology and go on telling ourselves we haven't done anything wrong?*

Better it to own up to our failings and take responsibility for them. It means swallowing our pride and asking others to forgive us. But that is a far better route to genuine reconciliation.

Absalom was also challenging David's commitment to the law. He was banking on David's reluctance to pursue justice and his readiness to let Absalom return showed he wouldn't demand justice now.

Absalom's continued scheming and manipulating

Absalom cannily persuaded those coming to the king for justice would only get it if he were appointed judge in the land (15:1-6). He 'stole the hearts (literally 'the minds') of the people of Israel.'

He kept that up for four more years before making his fateful move to seize the kingship from his father. His deceitful request to go and fulfil a vow to the LORD at Hebron played on two things dear to David's heart. What irony hangs on David's blessing on Absalom, 'Go in peace' (15:9).

Since the fateful day Tamar was raped by Amnon, Absalom had waited 11 years for this moment. Killing Amnon was not enough to deal with the hate burning inside him, so it shifted from Amnon to his father.

'The conspiracy gained strength and Absalom's following kept on increasing' (15:12). Such moments are not uncommon in history when, to those with a godly perspective, it can seem events have frustratingly and worryingly played out to the advantage of greedy, wicked people. But God had other plans.

David on the run for a second time

David's reaction to Absalom's treason might seem like that of a coward. But he'd already seen the way innocent people can end up in the firing line when his enemies pursue him.

David's flight from Absalom (ch 15-18) was punctuated with meetings with several people. They reinforce how God was continuing to provide for and protect David every step of the way. Ittai the Gittite and his 600 men provided devoted support (15:18-22). Zadok, Abiathar and the Levites provided spiritual perspective and a chance to learn what Absalom was plotting (v24-29).

To David, the ark was not some kind of guarantee of God's protection. He knew God was not restricted to exercising power through man-made objects, however sacred. David had recovered his dependence on God's grace and a willingness to surrender to His will (v25-26). He knew his future depended not on 'whether he had Yahweh's furniture, but on whether he had Yahweh's favour' (Dale Ralph Davies).

News that his chief adviser Ahithophel had deserted him for Absalom led David to offer up an arrow prayer to God (v31). God's answer was the immediate arrival of David's trusted friend Hushai.

Relevance to us: *How often do you send a lightning prayer up to God when faced with sudden upset or a situation that is out of your control? Apart from anything else it is an expression of our dependence on God, rather than trying to solve things on our own.*

The meeting with Ziba, servant to Mephibosheth grandson of Saul, provided more food, drink and donkeys, though with a dubious story about his master's reasons for staying in Jerusalem (16:1-4).

Only the encounter with Shimei appears negative (16:5-14). Yet David was prepared to accept his curses as only what David deserved from God (v10). But his understanding of God's character went deeper still. The Hebrew of v12 is better translated as '*Perhaps Yahweh will look at my iniquity and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today.*' David understood cursing would not be God's last word for those He'd chosen and through whom He continued to work out His purposes. God intends grace and blessing. When God's people sin, His discipline is a necessary step on the road back to that place of grace and blessing. Knowing this, David was at peace.

Relevance for us: *Today, we can be even more confident than David of this apparent paradox in the character of God. Because of the cross of Jesus, we know that God has thoroughly dealt with the horror of our sin. For us, it's not just a possibility that God will forgive us, the cross guarantees it. Amazingly, we can expect blessing rather than cursing and it should turn us to thankfulness and worship that we have such a God.*

God brings Absalom's rebellion to an end but not its consequences

The outworking of David's arrow prayer about Ahithophel (15:31) can be seen in 16:15-17:22. God did not frustrate Ahithophel's first advice that Absalom should reinforce his claim to be the rightful king by sleeping with David's concubines in broad daylight (16:20-23). But that was because it was to fulfil what He had declared to David through Nathan (12:11-12).

Ahithophel's advice about attacking David while he was weary was more dangerous (17:1-4), but God was still in charge and working through Hushai to influence Absalom and David's future (v5-14)..

Relevance for us: *God is still working out His plan for the whole of creation. Whatever human beings may plot or scheme, ultimately God will not allow them to destroy His Church or prevent His victory. In a world that seems to be dangerously chaotic, we'd do well to remember that.*

By favouring Absalom over David, Ahithophel defied not just God's anointed king, but also God himself and made himself an enemy of God's kingdom. His death was a consequence of that choice (v23).

When the two sides finally met, David commanded his men 'be gentle with Absalom for my sake' (18:5).

Absalom's death was a consequence of his love of long hair (see 14:25). His concern for his own appearance proved his undoing.

Relevance for us: *Beware of being overly concerned about appearances – either our own or those of others we might be attracted to follow. The world around us may think appearances matter more than most, but we should know God sees things differently.*

Despite David's clear command, Joab made sure Absalom was killed. David's reaction to his son's death was profound grief and regret (18:31-33), so much so that it almost cost him the continued loyalty of his own troops and those who had supported him (19:1-8).

The sharp disagreement that developed between David's tribe of Judah and the other Israelite tribes (except for Benjamin) over who was the first to bring David back as their king would grow deeper over the next 40 years. It led to the breakup of the Israelite kingdom, just ~100 years after it had begun.

Yet, all of this was within God's greater plan for Israel and for a far greater kingdom under Jesus.