

Absalom, Absalom

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[0 : 0 0] I want to start with a basic assertion. Here it is. Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Now when I say that, I think probably many of us, our minds go to scriptures about by stripes we healed, etc. Or the prophecies about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem. And that is great stuff. But as we think about Christ in the context of Old Testament narratives, Old Testament stories like Samuel, they have a different way of pointing to Christ. King David was the Messiah of God's people back in the days. And he points to Christ positively and negatively. Positively when he's at his best, right? Defeating the enemies, ruling with fairness and justice. And he helps us understand the shape of the kingdom and the character of Christ. However, as we've been reading in the last few weeks, David also does bad things. He loses the plot sometimes, does terrible things sometimes. And how is that helpful to us? How does that point us to Christ? Well it does this by showing us the surpassing greatness of Jesus. Because even when he's useless, there is a stirring in our hearts that long for a better leader, a better king, one that would rule with complete fairness and justice. And this is what Christ does. It's a longing in our hearts that it creates. And I hope you hear that when we hear about David sort of losing the plot. Now tonight's reading, as you heard, is David is, this is an example of the latter more than the former. It's a couple of tragic chapters in David's life.

He moves from this man who is outwardly focused on the kingdom to somebody that's inwardly focused on his sorrow, his family, and I think quite acutely his own guilt. And I'll be pointing that out quite a bit in the passage. And you might think, Aaron, you're being very mean and not very empathetic when you're talking about David. Of course he's in rough shape. Of course he's doing poorly. His son has died, has been killed. Can I just say this to you if you think I'm being mean? The passage is far less sympathetic towards David than you are. And it is presenting him as a guy who has lost his way.

Okay, so let's go to the text. All right, the first five verses of Samuel. It's going to be helpful. As you heard, it's a complex story here. First five verses of 2 Samuel 18. All right, David organizes his troops to go and fight Absalom's men. You remember David is at the wrong end of a military coup. Instigated by his son Absalom. All right, so David himself doesn't go out to fight. Verse three, his men say to him, you are worth 10,000 of us. This is very important in the passage. It's the first example of a number of times in the passage where people correctly identify David and his value and his station and his place. And that's held up in contrast to David who does not act like somebody.

who has this place. He acts like a grieving father. He doesn't act like the king that he is. And he's actually both. He acts very sort of un-Messiah-like. Now, if you're not tracking with me on that yet, that's fine. It's something that sort of unfolds. So just stay with me. All right, so the troops tell him to stay behind. Then he says, well, if you think it's best, it's very sort of passive, right? Then, so these guys are heading off to a war, many to their death. And as they head off fighting for David, David is at the gate and he yells, he yells out his final words to his men as they're heading out to war. And unfortunately, there is no Braveheart speech at this point.

[4 : 1 3] You know, there is, you know the speech, right? Fight and you may die, run and you'll live at least for a while and dying in your beds many years from now. Would you be willing to trade all your days from this day to that for one chance, just one chance to come back here and tell our enemies, the English, that, I just dropped that in for Ivan Baker, that they may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom. You know the story, right? It's great. It's a great speech.

And they all start yelling Scotland forever. It's wonderful, right? So what is, what does David say? What's his big inspirational speech to his men? Here it is. Deal gently with that young Absalom.

Deal gently with that young Absalom. These guys are going to fight for the kingdom. They're going to fight for him. They're fighting for God's chosen man. They're fighting an enemy who has split the kingdom. And David says, be gentle with this guy. Be nice to him. This way of describing Absalom, a couple of things here, is young. It's a word that could mean child or lad. It's like he's saying, be nice to that little scallywag Absalom. He's just going through a phase. He'll come through it. Well, this is not youthful rebellion. This is rebellion against God and his kingdom. And David is clearly blind and unfocused. The next few verses, we just outline the battle very, very quickly. Just verses six to eight. Spends a very short amount of time here. And as expected, given the chance to regroup, David's forces, who are smaller than Absalom's army, decimate them. And there's this interesting line here that says, the forest devoured more people that day than the sword. When I read that, I thought about Fanghorn. Verses nine to 15 give the most important example of that, actually, about the forest devouring people. And that is the death of Absalom, verses nine to 15. It says he was caught, caught his head in a tree. Tradition says it was here. The text is ambiguous here about whether it was here or it was here. Tradition says it was here. It makes sense that it was here in the context of the story because, you know, a few chapters ago in chapter 14, it talks about his hair. It was a very tall, handsome man with huge, luxurious kind of locks. And he would cut his hair once a year and he would weigh it and it was like 200 shekels or something like that of hair, right? And so there's this compelling image, right, of his hair. His vanity was his downfall. Verse nine says he was suspended between heaven and earth. There's a lot of detail in this, the death of Absalom here. He was suspended between heaven and earth. What is that all about? Well, heaven and earth. He's not an earthly king.

He's not really mates with the guys up here either, really. Like he's in the middle. He's nowhere. He's completely vulnerable. He's put himself in this position, basically. He's dangling. He's a terrible place. One of Joab's soldiers sees him and takes the news to Joab who berates him for not killing him and says, I would have given you, you know, thousands of shekels and a belt, which is interesting to me, like a bonus. And then it's probably, it's probably, I don't know if it's important, but Joab heads over there. And there's this really kind of powerful image of Joab, three javelins into Absalom's heart.

And then his other men finish the job. Verses 16 to 18, Absalom is buried in a pit. The story here is not just about killing Absalom. It's not just saying, well, that's it. They sorted him out. There is this, there's layers here. There is this bringing down of his God-like sort of aspirations. And it gets that across in a few ways. One, there's the physical image of him coming down. He's on his mule. He's dangling. He's on the ground. He's in a pit. There's this bringing down, this down, down, down movement here. And secondly, it comes out in these two kind of monuments, these two memorials to Absalom. There is one, it says in verse 18, whilst he was still alive, he set up this big monument, which he called Absalom. And that was his, I'm going to be remembered, this is my thing. And what does he end up with? Buried in this big monument? No, he ends up in a pit with stones, just thrown, angrily thrown on top. Absalom is more than just a tragic figure. He is a tragic figure. But he is a microcosm for anyone who sets himself up against God's kingdom, against his king, against his people. Driven by desire to be their own boss, to rule their own life.

[9 : 15] Disposing God. Disposing God's from his rightful place. It is a somber truth here, but this is what it's saying. That you cannot oppose God with impunity forever.

All right, before moving on, let me ask you a question. Was Joab wrong to kill Absalom? The text doesn't evaluate Joab's actions, it just describes it.

Here's what I think though. Joab was wrong, but David was wrong, more wrong, in telling him to go gently. It's a complicated story. His son was a cancer to the kingdom, and David didn't want to deal with him. Not properly. The cancer needed to go. Joab elected himself as a surgeon in this scenario.

He was a realist. He was a military man. He knew that David's history of dealing with his kids in the past was half-hearted, and that's why they're probably here at the moment. And he knew dealing gently would mean bringing Absalom back, and he knew that would be a danger to the kingdom. We create more mess, and so he dealt with it. Okay, verses 19 to 31. This is this quite extended scene. We only read a little bit of it. We have these two runners trying to tell David what had happened. This guy called Ah-Mehaz gets there first and says, blessed be the Lord your God who has delivered up the men who raised their hands against my Lord the King. The Cushite arrives and says, good news for the Lord King, for the Lord has delivered you this day from the hand of those

who rose up against you. These guys are both speaking the truth, and they're both, like the guy at the start, reminding David of who he is. My Lord the King. He uses that phrase three times. And they remind him of the result of all this. The goodness about this is that the kingdom is safe. And what is David's response? Is it well with the young man Absalom? Now the first runner who gets there avoids the question.

[11 : 29] He outruns the other guy thinking he's going to get a reward, right, from David. And when David responds by saying, oh, is everything okay with Absalom? He realizes I'm in a lot of trouble here. I need to backtrack here. Backtrack, backtrack, backtrack. Oh, I didn't see anything. It's all, there's lots of people and dust, and I don't, I don't know what happened, right?

The Cushite, he's a hired hand. He doesn't, I don't think he really gets the scenario what's going on. He's just very obviously says, may the enemies of the Lord my King, the Lord my King again, and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man. And how does David respond to the news that the kingdom is saved and his enemy, his son, is dead? Let me read it to you.

The passage says, and the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, oh, my son, Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom, would I have died instead of you?

Oh, Absalom, my son, my son. Let me keep reading into chapter 19, the first few verses. And it was Joab. Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom. So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people. For the people heard that day the king is grieving for his son, and the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed that flee in battle.

The king covered his face and the king cried with a loud voice, oh, my son, Absalom, oh, Absalom, my son, my son. David here, to use a sort of a sporting term, he grabs defeat. He snatches defeat from the jaws of victory.

[13 : 11] All his people who have fought for him, the Lord's Messiah, risked their lives, who saved the kingdom. He shames them. He shames them. He makes them feel guilty for what they've done. He is so caught up in his grief, he's just, he's forgotten what he is here for. He has forgotten about the kingdom.

And you're thinking, Aaron, you're so mean. Well, let me just add a couple of things here. Absalom was not a silly, rebellious youth. He wanted to kill David and take over the kingdom in opposition to God.

He didn't love David. David loved him, clearly. He didn't love David. He was just engorged with this staggering ambition, just consumed by revenge, murder, rage, desire for power.

And I think one of the real clues to understanding David's grief here, because there's more to it than my son is dead. There's more to it than that's really sad, is this line here. Would I have died instead of you?

David here is admitting that this is a result of his actions. If he had dealt differently with Bathsheba and Uriah, not seduced her, not killed him, and led his family, his kids along that track of you just grab what you want, Amnon likely wouldn't have raped his sister Tamar.

[14 : 49] Absalom likely not sought revenge, not just giving himself over to the desire for power and getting whatever you want. If he had led his family in the way of forgiveness, if he had restored his daughter Tamar, if he had done a lot of things, if he had quenched the rebellion in its early stages, which would develop slowly. None of this would happen.

And David is saying here, this should be me that's dead, because I, my actions led to this. His grief is morbid.

It is, you know the lament we read like sort of a month or so ago, when he was grieving over Saul and Jonathan, it was this quite structured, beautiful, very emotional grief, right?

But you get this sense here, it's like, my son, my son, he's just lost, he's lost to his grief. And the writer of 2 Samuel here, is just allowing us to enter David's mind at this point in his life, this change in his psyche, when he is, he's turning away from the kingdom, and becoming inwardly focused on his own dysfunction, and guilt, and regret.

He is off balance, out of step. And Joab calls him to order. This is verses 19 to 8.

[16 : 26] Joab just starts laying into him, he gives him the speech, it's like a smack in the face kind of speech. And the big line is verse 6, you love those who hate you, and you hate those who love you.

If Absalom were alive, and all of us were dead, then you would be pleased. He's saying, get your act together. Your people, he says, your people are going to, if you carry on like this, you'll have no one left.

Everyone's going to leave you. I think he's threatening a coup at this point. So King David does pull himself together, and kind of gets the kingdom in order. The last sort of, few bits we didn't really read.

And in doing that, he's won the war, and he's trying to put things together. Verses 16 to 39, we hear about three people that come and visit David.

There's first Shimei, who's the guy that cursed him last week. He says to David, I'm really sorry, you know, stuff was happening. And you might think, oh this is really nice, he's repenting, but he's not repenting.

[17:27] We know there's a clue here, he says to David, don't take it to heart. Have you heard that before? Don't take it to heart? Who said that? This Absalom said that to Tamar, after she was raped.

That's the Bible saying, it's the little code for like, this guy Shimei, he's dodgy. And Abishai here, who's the guy that when Shimei was cursing, wanted to cut off the guy's head, and David said, no, don't worry about it.

Again he says in verse 21, shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the Lord's anointed? This is someone else again, reminding David of who he is, and what he should do.

But he doesn't harm Shimei, and it's a crass political decision. He doesn't want to cause problems basically. He isn't ruling here with justice. And then Mephi, you know, comes back into the scene, and remember last week, it was Mephi's main guy, his chief servant Zeba, who comes along and says, listen you didn't hear it from me, but Mephi's talking it up, and he reckons he's going to get the kingdom back that you stole, right?

Well Mephi turns up, completely disheveled, and he says it's not true. Basically what happened is, Zeba lied to this guy Mephi as well, and Mephi wanted to get on a mule and ride out in exile with David, but he's lame, right, so he couldn't do it.

[18:57] And so Mephi here goes into voluntary exile. He lives like a man in exile, so he turns up to David looking terrible. So what does David do to set this right?

Completely swindled by Zeba. He says, okay, well let's just like, let's just cut the wealth in half then, shall we? Because he gave everything to Zeba last week.

Instead of giving it all back to Mephi, he goes, well, let's just go halvesies. Which is not ruling with fairness and justice. And it's a, again, it's a crass political decision because Zeba has become a man of influence now.

He's got a bit of an entourage with him. David doesn't want to annoy him. And then there's the rich old guy that turns,