

Unnecessary Grief

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] Well, if you would like to open your Bibles to the passage we're looking at today, 2 Samuel 18 and 19, it's on page 269, 270, 271, 272 in the Old Testament.

And if you come to church today for a happy, uplifting, inspiring, spiritual something, I'm sorry to disappoint you, this passage does not give it to us.

It's the story of a very sad victory, King David and his troops over his son Absalom and his troops, and it is messy and it is complicated and there are all sorts of shades of grey in it and I absolutely love it.

However, it's tragic and it's tragic at all sorts of levels. It's tragic because King David could have prevented this. If you've been tracking with us, you'll know there's nothing nice about his son Absalom.

He's a spoiled, ambitious, vain, calculating so-and-so. But David has lost his edge. He's taken his eye off the ball. So when David's first son Amnon raped his daughter Tamar, David did nothing.

[1 : 1 9] And when Absalom, son number three, murdered Amnon, David did nothing. And when Absalom returned from exile to Jerusalem, David did nothing.

When Absalom fomented insurrection by lies and deception in Jerusalem, David did nothing. When Absalom went out and crowned himself king and gained a great following in Israel, David did nothing.

So it's tragic and the consequences are partly playing out today. But there's a deeper tragedy. This is not just a family squabble, dad, son.

This is not just a civil war with tens of thousands of people being killed. This is God's king, David. This is the kingdom of God, the people of God. And by his paralysis and by his passivity, King David has opened up a division within the people of God that's going to haunt the Bible until we come to the New Testament.

There are now two messiahs, two kings, and the kingdom of God is in disarray. And if you are with us for the first time or you're visiting or you've been away for a few weeks, welcome back.

[2 : 3 2] And I'd like to... It's hard to keep track of all the characters, so I'd like to turn you to the front of the bulletin to two brilliant pieces of artwork. On the left is a magnificent map.

Some of us like maps, some of us don't. That's fine. The land of Israel, I've drawn a line across it because a fissure opens up in the people of God here. The people of the north, although the whole land is called Israel, the ten tribes in the north, the ten of the twelve, are called Israel.

And in the south, it's called Judah, even though it's part of Israel as well. And Jerusalem, you can see where Jerusalem is in the south in Judah, and David has been chased by Absalom and the troops all the way, almost out of the land to Machanaim, where the forests are, across the Jordan River.

And I'll explain Gilgal in just a minute. And on the right-hand side, there are two armies. So the head of one army is Absalom, David's son. I've given a little tiny crown. And Amasa, spelt incorrectly, over the army of Israel.

Amasa is David's nephew, not that important. David is king of Judah. And David appoints three generals, Abishai, his brother Joab, Joab the great commander, and Ittai the Gittite.

[3 : 55] And under them is the army of Judah. So if at any time in the sermon I'm saying something and you don't understand, go back to that diagram, and there's going to be a little quiz at the end of church. And if you don't get 50%, you're not a real Christian.

That's a joke. Kidding. There are three movements in the passages that was read to us today. The first is about the death of Absalom. Before they go out into battle, David musters his men at Machinaim.

He appoints the three generals. And the generals say to David, you must not come out with us. Not because you're a bad fighter, but because they have a sense that David is God's chosen Messiah.

And the kingdom is in such a disarray, it would be utterly catastrophic if God's chosen Messiah, the one on whom God put the Holy Spirit, were to die. We would be in the hands of that vicious and malicious son of yours.

So David exceeds. And as they march out, David has his own piece of instruction. It's in verse 5 of chapter 18. If you just cast your eyes down, he orders Joab, the three generals, deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.

[5 : 07] And we will say, what? Deal gently with my cancer doctor. You want us to march out and risk our lives and save your skin against this rebellion, which has been almost single-handedly orchestrated by your son Absalom.

That spoiled son you won't deal with. We're going out to slaughter and the one piece of advice you give us is to treat him nicely. And what's your reason, King David?

It's because he's young. David doesn't call him that young man Absalom who's the cause of this slaughter, who's divided the kingdom, who's raised an insurrection.

That young man, that naughty boy, he calls him. He's just young. He'll grow out of it. And I think David has completely lost perspective. He is valuing Absalom above the kingdom.

He wants better for his son than he does for the kingdom. He wants his men to put his bruised and guilty feelings ahead of their own lives. And in doing so, he's out of step with his followers and he's out of step with God.

[6 : 21] In fact, in just two verses, the battle gets dealt with, despite the fact that David does not deserve it. In verses six to eight, we find that Israel is defeated by the servants of David with a terrible cost.

Twenty thousand are killed. And at the end of verse eight, this is how it happens. The battle spread over the face of all the country and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword.

It's like fanghorn in the Lord of the Rings. It's like the land is biting back. While David is moaning and complaining back in the city of Mahanaim, the very land itself, the trees rise up and save God's Messiah.

The focus of this first scene is not the big battle. It's the death of Absalom. And his demise comes courtesy of his own vanity. He's riding along through the forest on his trusty mule, as you do.

And his long, luxurious and luscious hair get caught in a tree. There's not quite clear what happens. But I think his gorgeous hair gets stuck in a tree and the trusty mule races on.

[7 : 28] And here's verse nine. He is suspended between heaven and earth. When it's told Joab, Joab immediately wants to finish Absalom off.

We are reminded in the text, in the discussion, that David explicitly commanded you not to do it. But Joab goes ahead anyway. And in verses 14 and 15, over the page in chapter 18, verses 14 and 15, we read the gruesome end of Absalom.

And Joab, the general, takes three spears in one hand. That's a very big hand. And he goes, and sticks them through Absalom. And his young armor bearers cut him down and finish him off.

And the question is, was Joab right or was Joab wrong? We're not told. Yes, he disobeys an explicit order of David's. But David's order was foolish.

And we've watched this kingdom be torn in half because of David's half measures, his refusal to deal with Absalom. And I think Joab's had a belly full. And he acts, in this instance, as the king should act because David's lost the plot.

[8 : 39] But Joab's not a bloodthirsty warrior intent on revenge. Look at the very next verse. Verse 16, he restrains the troops from any more killing. He's not being vindictive.

He's dealing with the root of the problem. And so ends Absalom's career, the self-appointed Messiah. This is what happens to every self-appointed Messiah. Verse 17, they took Absalom, threw him into a great pit in the forest, and raised over him a very great heap of stones.

And all Israel fled to their own home. And in that verse, David's murder of Uriah has come home to roost in his own family. Absalom is buried like a man under a curse.

And despite the fact that he'd won all popularity contests, and that he set up a monument to himself, his true monument is a pile of rocks over a very deep chasm in some forest far, far away.

That's the end of Absalom. And then we come to the middle scene, the middle movement. And this is as David hears the news. And a lot of space in this passage is given to how David receives the news.

[9 : 46] Because bringing this news to David is very tricky. You know, since chapter 11, since Bathsheba and Uriah are fair, David's been acting highly unreliably and erratically.

And when he hears the news, he completely breaks down. The last verse of chapter 18, he cries out, Oh, my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom, would I had died instead of you?

Oh, Absalom, my son, my son. And he keeps going. Chapter 19, verse 4. Oh, my son Absalom, oh Absalom, my son, my son. Now, at one level, it's hard not to feel some sympathy for David, isn't there?

I mean, his son has died. It's a real loss. But I think we've got good reason to be skeptical of this grief. Well, let me put it better.

I think our sympathy ought to be directed elsewhere. And I say that for three reasons. Firstly, the way the news comes to David, the way it comes to him, demonstrates how far he's taken his eye off the ball.

[10 : 53] You see, the two runners who come, it's reported to him twice, 28 to 30 and 31 to 33 in chapter 18. Both runners speak to him in terms of God's kingdom, God's deliverance, and him being the Messiah.

And what's David's response in both instances? What about Absalom? What about the young man Absalom? Doesn't care about the 20,000 who've died.

Doesn't care about the kingdom of God. And when he hears what's happened, he says, I wish I was dead. Now, I want to tread carefully here. Because, of course, his grief is genuine.

But it's distorted. It's distorted by his own guilt and inaction. And, you know, one level we can admire David. He's so honest. I mean, he's so open about his feelings and expresses himself so clearly.

But as he expresses himself, it exposes what's been going on for the last seven chapters. He's still siding with his family over the kingdom. David would rather that his spoilt and vicious son Absalom were alive and that he, the Messiah of God, were dead.

[12 : 04] He doesn't say a word about God's deliverance or God's restoration. He just wallows in his failure. Psychologists would say he is perseverating. His wheels are spinning.

He's focused on one thing, and he's going over and over and over and over. He's obsessing over it, even though it's past. He's giving in to his regret and his self-blame, and it's on a sort of a feedback loop.

And I think this is part of the beauty of our Old Testament narratives. It shows us real people in real pain with real failure. And it's not simple.

David's grief is understandable. But he's given himself over to his grief and his shame and his guilt in such a way that he can think of nothing else but Absalom. Blind to the people who have given their lives for this.

Blind to God's deliverance. Blind to the kingdom of God. I think it's morbid grief. And so we just hold our sympathy back a little bit. The second reason I think we should do that is the author tells us what he thinks.

[13 : 08] Look down at chapter 19, verse 2. 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 when they flee in battle.

By his response, David snatches defeat from the jaws of victory. He brings humiliation to his troops. You just picture it. They stagger back in from the battle, traumatized and wounded, perhaps thankful that God had given them victory.

And what greets them? The sound of the king wailing above the gate, wailing and wailing and wailing. And by putting Absalom at the center of his universe, David dishonors his people.

And the author will not let us forget that David's decisions are having real and disastrous consequences much wider than his family. So we have both sympathy and suspicion.

And the third reason I think we should be skeptical is because of Joab's rocket. Look down at chapter 19, verses 5 to 7.

[14 : 18] This little speech is so good, I just want to reread it to you in chapter 19. Joab goes to the king in verse 5, he says, You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants.

You have this who have this day saved your life and the lives of your sons. You've got 10 of them left, by the way, David, and your daughters, Tamar, who has no justice yet, and your wives and your concubines who you abandoned in Jerusalem because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you.

You've made it clear today to the commanders and servants they're nothing to you. Today I know if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead, you'd be pleased. Now therefore, get up, go out, speak kindly to your servants.

I swear by the Lord, here's the threat. If you do not, not a man will stay with you this night and this will be worse for you than all the evil that's come upon you from your youth until now. Now, Joab does not win first prize for pastoral sensitivity.

This is not what you call compassion, gentle empathy. And I don't advise dealing with anyone's grief in this way. Even though what he's doing perhaps might be right.

[15 : 32] The way he's doing it is so harsh. But again, put yourself in Joab's shoes. He's had to pick up after David's mess ever since this Absalom thing finished.

So he says to him, wake up, man. He says, you can win this battle and lose the kingdom. You keep siding with your spoiled and selfish son against the people of God. You're going to bring this nation to ruin.

You've covered the faces of the men today with shame. They saved your life. You love those who hate you and you hate those. You're treating people shabbily.

You show you value Absalom above all of us combined. You'd be happy today if God's purposes came to an end. You're so distracted by your guilt and inability.

You're about to lose the whole thing. Get up, go out. It's pretty strong stuff, particularly to King. And David does. He gets up and he goes out. There's no prayer.

[16 : 29] There's no consulting God. There's no thanking God. He doesn't thank the troops. He just grimly gets up and does his duty. His heart is not in it. And so at the end of this second scene, the second movement, the king is not healed and the kingdom is not healed.

And then the third scene is chapter 19 to the end, the return of the king to Jerusalem. It's a pretty pathetic return. In verses 9 and 10, the 10 northern tribes of Israel realize they've backed the wrong horse.

So they say, let's get David back. There's no repentance. They don't take responsibility for their part in the rebellion and the civil war.

They just say, let's go back to David. David, and amazingly, in verses 11 to 15, when David hears they want to bring him back, David sets up a bizarre competition between the south and the north.

He says, who's going to be the first to bring me over the Jordan to Gilgal? Gilgal was where the Exodus finished. God opened up the Jordan.

[17 : 42] The people went across the Jordan. They made covenant with God there. They had their first Passover there. That's where they conquered the land from. And David is trying to cynically harness the power of the crossing of the Jordan and Gilgal for what's left of his reign.

Worse, he appeals to the men of Judah based on their pride. He says, I'm more closely related to you. You come and get me first. Worse than that, in verse 13, he sacks Joab, the winning commander, and replaces him with Absalom's commander, Amasa.

I can't have a man like Joab around speaking like that to me. Amasa, who's got a track record of betrayal and disloyalty. And so in a very, very public way, David again sides with his family against the kingdom, polarizing the kingdom.

And we have, as he comes across the Jordan, there are three encounters. These are under the heading, you see in the Bible from verse 16 onwards, the heading in the Bible is that David pardons his enemies.

You know that the headings are not inspired, don't you? They're not part of the text. David doesn't forgive his enemies. He doesn't deal with anything. He makes cynical political decisions. And in each of these three encounters, it's someone else who tells him that he is the Messiah of God.

[19 : 05] However, the scene finishes in verses 41 to 43, in competition, in conflict, and confusion. David's preferential treatment of the southern tribes leads to a dialogue.

I hope you noticed this when it was being read. It's like a schoolyard brawl. Israel says to him, it's unfair. Why did you let Judah come and get you? And Judah says, well, he's our relative.

And they say, yeah, but we've got ten tribes, you've only got two. I mean, it's just, it's very unsatisfying. And so David is back in Jerusalem, back in power, but nothing's dealt with, and the kingdom is in shambles.

And there's the passage. It's not tidy. It's complex. And I'm really glad it's here in God's Word. I'm really glad that it's part of the story of God, the story of Christ.

Our story is God's people. And I want to direct our hearts towards three things that come directly out of this story. And you can take these away and meditate on them.

[20 : 10] The first is realism. Aren't you glad that the Bible gives us thorough realism? It's not interested in sentimental painting pictures or pretending.

David is a man like you and like me. He's a man of faith. He was the man after God's own heart. And while his life had moments of tremendous obedience and great creative faithfulness, he also has his share of grubby, destructive, and selfish behavior.

He is a mystery, as we are a mystery to ourselves. We are a paradox to ourselves. We are a judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe.

And I don't reckon any religion is worth its salt unless it can give us some account of these contradictions within us. And that's exactly what the Bible does here. Here is God's man, but he's taken his eyes off God and his grace.

And all he can think about is his failure, particularly within his family. This is Bible realism. And here's the thing. God's not finished with David yet.

[21 : 31] So if you just turn right to chapter 23 of 2 Samuel. Just read the first couple of verses.

These are the last words of David. The last words of David. The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed, the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel, he rejoices.

The spirit of the Lord speaks by me. His word is on my tongue. God of Israel has spoken. The rock of Israel has said to me, when one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, which I didn't do all the time, he dawns on them like morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes the grass to sprout from the earth.

Yes, he does turn back to God. Yes, he is God's man. But in our section today, we get the unblinking, realistic account of his failure. And I'm kind of glad that you don't get a chronicle of my failure, and that I don't get a chronicle of yours, because every single one of us takes our eyes off God.

We find it very difficult to trust God, particularly when we're filled with guilt, and other people are paying the consequences. But this is part of the life of faith. The life of faith is not a straight line.

[22 : 58] It's not victory, victory, victory, up, up, up all the way, without any disappointments. In this section, David fails. He fails catastrophically, just as we do.

That's what it means to be a church. We're a fellowship of failures. That's why we confess our sins week by week by week. Only once in this section does David refer to God, and it's sort of an offhanded oath.

He's got other things on his mind. Because you see, at different stages of life, we face different temptations. And this is David in midlife, and he could not trust God for his family.

He'd heard the word of God, he'd heard the word of forgiveness after the Bathsheba-Uriah incident, but somehow he couldn't bring the word of grace to bear on his son. And even when God miraculously delivers him courtesy of the forest, David can't see it.

David can't appreciate it. His vision is just filled with his failure. And so he stops seeking first the kingdom, and he seeks first his own dynasty. Wouldn't you love to sidle up to David at this stage and say to him, David, let me read to you something that you wrote.

[24 : 09] It's really good. What joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight. What joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt.

But it wouldn't have worked. I think the reason this is in the Bible is that God is not just the God of what's safe and neat and tidy.

God's our God. He's the God of the messy, flawed, grubby, wonderful, sinful, brilliant, faithful, unbelieving hearts.

There's a terrific realism to this, I think. The second word is the word of grace. Verse 5 in chapter 23, David says, Does not my house stand so with God?

For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?

[25 : 09] Like our lives, this story has the shape of grace to it. God is utterly committed to doing us good.

And it's God who's going to bring his kingdom, not us, but the way he brings his kingdom is through people who are flawed, like you and me and like David. You know, at the beginning of the David story, on the day he faced Goliath, he was utterly innocent, he was completely trusting God and God acted very powerfully.

And on the day of the battle with Absalom, he was utterly guilty, he didn't trust God and God still acted powerfully. That's what's so amazing about the gospel of grace.

God doesn't wait for us to clean up our act. And even after you've been a Christian for quite a long time, you've been a follower for years, you might be in a position of leadership, you might have others looked to you and you fail very badly and your failure has serious effects on people around you.

The question is, is God still working? Does he find it more difficult to work in that circumstance or not? That's why trying to be good on our own, it just doesn't work.

[26 : 21] Because the only thing that has the power to break us out of that perseverating cycle is the grace of God. Because God's work and God's love and God's acceptance of us is not because of our track record.

It's not because of our track record when we begin as a Christian or when we finish as a Christian. He works because of his grace. And that is true, brothers and sisters, on the first day you became a Christian and it's true all the way through our lives until we die.

The problem is, when we focus on ourselves, it becomes very difficult to believe that God actually loves us. When we feel overwhelmed by failure, when we feel beyond the forgiveness of God.

And if you feel beyond the forgiveness of God, have you done more than David did? If you have, come and see me afterwards. One of the lovely things about this aspect of the grace of God in this narrative, we don't see the grace in the very big things, we see it in the small things, in the quiet voices of the people who are around about David.

It's his men who remind him of his value to God. It's the runners who came up to him and say, it's the Lord who's delivering you. It's Job and his brother who remind him, look, God's purposes are continuing despite your failure.

[27 : 39] And I think that's why we need each other. We need each other to speak the word of grace to each other and we need to listen, to really listen to each other, to bring the reality of God's grace into the circumstances of our lives.

Realism and grace. And the third thing, finally and quickly, what do you get if you put Bible realism together with the grace of God? And I think you get hope.

Hope. Has God given up on his kingdom? No. Is David as good as it gets? No. Wouldn't it be great if we had a Messiah who came from God, who really cared about the kingdom, who chose the kingdom over his own needs, who never deviated from trusting God, who always acted for the good of his people like a good shepherd?

Wouldn't it be great to have a Messiah who didn't need his own sins to be forgiven but could act for the forgiveness of our sins? Jesus, the son of David. And I think it's so important for us to come through these last chapters in 2 Samuel.

Don't you find as you look at David, you long for a better Messiah? And Jesus didn't have the fortune of having people around him who would encourage him.

[28 : 58] At his most critical moment under the greatest pressure, his friends went to sleep. Realism, grace, hope. Our hope is not in ourselves, it's in our Messiah.

And when he was tempted, he went all the way in resistance. He suffered as he was tempted and that's why he's able to help all who are tempted. Well able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses.

He has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. So, let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Would you kneel to pray?

The words of Psalm 34. Amen. The Psalm of David. I will extol the Lord at all times.

[30 : 24] His praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord. Let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me.

Let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord and he answered me. He delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant.

Their faces shall never be covered with shame. This poor man cried and the Lord heard him. He saved him out of all his troubles for the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and he delivers them.

Taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. Fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing.

The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Father, in hearing of the life of David, we find ourselves identifying with him far more than we would like to.

[31 : 38] we thank you. We thank you for the thoroughgoing realism of your word that reveals to us a mere image of ourselves when we see ourselves as grubby, selfish individuals whose behavior is an embarrassment to us and to you.

Father, we know that the apostle says that we all fall short in many things.

But Father, we thank you for the word of grace that breaks through our cycles of failure. We thank you for your commitment to work through flawed people like ourselves.

Father, we acknowledge how deeply we need each other. We pray that in our vulnerability we might come closer to each other as we come close to you.

Father, we thank you that there is hope for us, that as we pilgrim through scripture, we never want to lose sight of the Mount Calvary, of your sacrifice on our behalf, of your deep love for us expressed in your willingness to send your son to die in our place, that we might know hope and freedom, grace.

[33 : 20] So, Father, we come to you this morning crying out to you in our poverty, in the poverty of our spirits, in the poverty of our own despair, in the poverty of our own self-righteousness.

We call out to you as did David the psalmist, as did the children of Israel time and again. We call out to you to rescue us, to restore us, to revive us.

Father, we ask you to help us to taste and see that you are good, that you are faithful, that as we turn to you again to find refuge, that we will discover again your faithfulness, your provision, your refreshment.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Father, you've instructed us to pray for our rulers, knowing that they, as we, will have to one day account for our stewardship of your creation, of our caring for the widow and the orphan, of our concern for justice.

Father, we pray for those who are seeking to deal with the economic difficulties facing Europe, and for the various trouble spots in the world internationally, for Afghanistan, for Sudan, for Iran, and we especially cry out to you for suffering believers in many parts of the world.

[34 : 38] We pray for diplomats, for leaders of non-governmental organizations, for our Prime Minister and his Cabinet, for the premiers of our provinces, the mayors of our cities.

May they work for the peace, order, and good government of this land, and seek to use Canada's influence in the world for peace. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Father, we pray for this congregation as it is involved in this visioning process over the next several weeks. We pray for your guidance that you would make a way for us, that you would give us a vision that is your vision.

We may be able to reach out to those in the city who, without realizing it, desperately need to know you. Father, we pray for those who work locally, Richie Spidell with the Navigators and Kristen Rumerie with Living Waters.

We pray for those who've gone out from this church and are serving overseas, for Jeremy Curry with Youth of the Mission, for Janine and Philip Lafleur, working with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students in Central Asia.

[35 : 57] We pray for those who are in a special need of our prayers this morning, for Derek, Rowena, Susan, Chris, Brian, Linda, Marguerite, Ruth, Glenn, Colton, and August.

Father, these people are known to you. A few of them perhaps may be known to one or two in the congregation, those who are close to them, but Father, we bring them to you, having been asked to intercede on their behalf, that you would bring grace and mercy, healing, refreshment in their lives.

Most of all, that you, Father, would give them hope, hope that you will rescue them. Lord, in your mercy. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.