

The Rise and Fall of Prince Absalom

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[0:00] the king all is well and he bowed before the king with his face to the earth and said blessed be the lord your god who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king now i'm going to stop after this evening for a time we've been looking at these chapters over the past few weeks now and i want to take a break after this evening and turn our attention to some other themes and subjects and passages in the bible before returning for one last time to two or three of the last chapters in the life of david we've been following closely this story from the very beginning and we've seen the way in which absalom first of all killed his brother amnon for raping his sister but we've also seen how that conveniently put absalom in line to the throne of israel we've also seen how absalom plays the long game he's in no hurry to achieve his goals and his ambitions he has plenty of patience he's waiting for his moment but neither should we be under any illusions as to what absalom's motives were he wanted the throne of israel and the more he waited the more he wanted for years he worked away and winning the hearts of ordinary people turning them away from their allegiance to king david by way of flattery and personal affection he wanted to get to know them and showed personal affection to every one of them who came to the king for judgment and that way one by one bit by bit step by step he won the hearts of the people until his moment came he took his chance and he rose quickly and publicly against his father and he staged an almighty rebellion gathering to him thousands of thousands of followers and thought forcing david out of his residence forcing him to flee and to become a refugee traveling miles and miles with all those who joined on to him these chapters have told us about those who were faithful to david for them this was a crisis point that revealed who belonged to david and who didn't belong to him they declared their allegiance and their obedience to him as the god anointed covenant king and we've seen that this was not simply a matter of national allegiance to a national king this was a spiritual matter if you recognize david you recognized god as your covenant king and the the king that god had anointed david was the man who god wanted to be on the throne of israel but the chapters also told us who turned against david and even although it was the popular thing to do or appear to be the popular thing to do they turned towards absalom and followed him it was one or the other either you were a follower of david and you showed allegiance to him or else you were a follower of absalom and that included some of david's most trusted or who he thought were most his most trusted men the most notable of them being ahithophel who was one of david's most trusted advisors but who betrayed him and he sided with absalom this was the apart from absalom himself this was the greatest disappointment that david discovered ahithophel says some people say that she was bathsheba's grandfather which may of course explain

his actions in turning to absalom's side but there were others of course who showed their allegiance to david they wanted to follow him and go with him where they were but they were better placed going back into jerusalem because there they were of more useful service to david by being by pretending to be on absalom's side and to be with him there they could act almost like spies if you like and they could do say david's service from the other side so hushai was one of these hushai was a man who david sent back into jerusalem to give advice if he so wanted it to absalom and that's exactly what happened absalom had to devise a strategy for pursuing david so he first of all asked the advice of ahithophel who truly was on his side and his advice was to conduct a surgical strike to take some men and that he would take some men and that he would go to where he thought david was and to find david and to take him out but then absalom stopped and he asked for hushai's advice hushai was the spy and hushai's advice was entirely the opposite to the advice of ahithophel he said that absalom himself personally should mount a full-scale attack on david and his men so that way that the glory would be an almighty one that way that all the credit all the victory would go to absalom and he would come back as the established king of israel and astonishingly this was the advice that absalom favored this is the one that he wanted to do the strategy that he wanted to take meanwhile once it became known that absalom had made a decision and that this was a strategy it had to be the word had to get to warn david and two other spies jonathan and ahima's who were also in the vicinity of jerusalem they got wind of this there was a chain of communication so that the word would pass from where absalom was through jonathan and ahima's they were to take the message all the way they were the riders if you like they were the carriers of the information that they and their job was to ride all the way from jerusalem to where david was around about a hundred miles away this was quite a distance away he was over in the forest of ephraim but jonathan and ahima's their location was detected someone saw them and the chapter before tells us that they had to hide in a well while the woman tried to persuade the soldiers that they had already gone they had to hide in a well their whereabouts had become known and they came within an inch of their lives of being found out i read a passage like this and i wonder this is so strange isn't it why why this kind of detail is given to us and what i find myself what i find myself asking myself is this that if god was behind david and if god's will and purpose was to give the victory to david at the end of the day and then why why did these two men why were they found out and why did they come within a hairsbreadth of losing their lives why did they have to hide in a well surely if god is behind this he would make it smooth and easy for people in order to fulfill his purpose but that's not the way is it and you and i

all know that that it's not the way that god works his own purposes and his own will through the difficulties that arise he doesn't always take them away some people they come to the wrong conclusion that because they hit snags and because they come up against obstacles in their lives that somehow they must be doing the wrong thing and that god's not behind it just because you hit snags and obstacles does not mean that you're going the wrong direction it means that life is full of snags and obstacles and god through his own providence is able to work us and guide us and lead us and direct us through them all we cannot expect as god's people for god to take away all the obstacles but we do don't we we always fall into this trap of thinking that somehow that providence equals god making things easy for me but god doesn't always make it easy for us it's life is full of difficulty and grace means that we have to with determination meet these difficulties and with that quiet resolution stick at it just like jonathan and ahamaz they knew that they were doing god's work and they knew that even although that that involved danger that they had to stick at it for the sake of what they had been entrusted to do god did not strike down their pursuers but he gave success to them in the refuge and god had the victory at the end at the end of the day in any case news eventually got back to david where he was in exile in mahanaim and that absalom was setting out for a vast army and the chapter that we read begins with david and his strategy as to how he was going to respond to this vast army coming in order to take his life and to destroy as many of david's followers as follows so as possible so what he did was he divided his own army into three three sections one of them was under joab we all know who joab is the other section was under abishai who was joab's brother and the third section was under itai the gitite david first of all wanted to join his men and go personally with them but they wisely advised him in fact i think it was more than advice they said no way are you going to risk your life coming with us because your life is worth a thousand of hours if they find you the battle is finished the battle is won as far as they're concerned and so david took the advice but before they went he pleaded with his men not to harm his son absalom and of course the chapter then goes on to tell us of how absalom and his men they arrive in the area in the vicinity and there is a huge battle and an extensive battle in which we read that the forest claimed more lives than the sword as i'm sure we can imagine that how if you have a large army in a thick forest that that doesn't bode well that you don't get a lot of liberty to swing your sword or to ride your horse if the forest and if there's lots of close trees who knows what kind of accidents would have happened there the forest claimed more lives but then in verse 9 in the thick of everything we read these words and absent did you notice this as we read the chapter and absalom happened to meet

the servants of david absalom happened to meet the servants of david and this is where we see that in the thick of this battle and in all the complexity and in the confusion and in all the uncertainty that was taking place that day god was in this and he was ordering the events that would take place in order for him to have the victory and for his enemies to be vanquished and somehow in the providence of god as absalom was riding his mule in verse 9 it tells us that he happened to meet and there can't have been anybody else with him he was on his own he may have got separated from the from the rest of the army somehow that can happen in battle especially if the army didn't were afraid that he might be spotted but the problem is he had already been spotted god's eye was upon him for judgment and for destruction and absalom was riding on his mule and the mule went under the thick branches of a great terebinth and his head you remember of course how how beforehand there was this description of the weight of his hair his hair was long deliberately left that way in order to draw attention to himself because this is the kind of person that absalom was he was a self-worshipper a person who we read later on in that passage that he he had a pillar erected for himself he called the pillar after his own name as far as absalom was concerned he was the center of his universe and the very his very pride and joy the very feature that distinguished him from everyone else in israel was the very feature that caused his downfall when the mule which he was riding went under a low tree and when the tree caught his hair and he was and the mule rode on leaving him helpless hanging in the air one of david's servants came upon him and hesitated he knew who it was there was no mistaking with hair like that who else could it be but he hesitated because he had heard david giving the order not to touch absalom please spare absalom my son and when he told joab joab scolded him he couldn't believe that he had missed out on the opportunity of putting him to death i would have given you silver he said no no he says no you wouldn't have you may have given me silver but what good is that when i get back to the king and it becomes known that i'm the man who killed him you would claim no responsibility for it you would stand back and let me take the rap for it no amount of silver in all the world is worth my life if i have to confront a king who is who is overcome with grief joab had no time for this argument he felt that it was an excuse and joab took it upon himself to to put absalom to death and next comes the most bizarre set of circumstances again one of those passages in which you think why is this there why is this detail there the detail as to who's going to tell david and who's going to be first to tell david first of all ahima's you remember now he's the young man who hid in the well he was one of the spies who went over to jerusalem he was the one who risked his life when it became known that he was there ahima's he's next to joab and he says i want to go and tell david what's happened and joab i think quite wisely at that point said no no you're not the one to tell him no you're not going instead a cushite an ethiopian he sends him and the cushite goes and

there's this whole passage there that is given over to this argument between joab and ahima's and the cushite as to who's going to be first i asked myself ask myself why is this there what are we to pick up from this well we're to pick up first of all that this is an actual historical account this all happened we can trust our bibles the bible is made up of of stories that are have been put together by men and women who's who's who actually wrote down what they saw as they saw it as it happened this is not just stuff of legend this is what god wants us to know in all its detail when you come across a story with so much detail as this you know that someone has taken it upon themselves to write down carefully and meticulously because this is the history of god's covenant people and god's determination his determination come what may to preserve his covenant people and to appoint over them and to preserve the man that he has appointed over them god loves his people and that's the message all through the old testament god's people are precious to him god never abandons his people and he wants us to know that in every detail in all the details that that are useful to us but i find it fascinating that ahima's he he says to joab i want to go and tell david the news joab instead he sends the cushite the ethiopian to tell david the news so off the cushite goes to tell david the is it good news or is it bad news it's both isn't it it's good news for israel it's bad news for david so the cushite goes but ahima's not deterred he says look please let me go so eventually joab he relents and he lets ahima go and ahima is determined to get there before the cushite so he takes a slightly different road he takes a shortcut or whatever i don't know but he gets there he eventually he manages to get there just before the cushite and he gets into david and ahima's cried out to the king all is well he bowed before the king with his face to the earth and ahima said blessed be the lord your god who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against the lord the king but the king said is it well with the young man absalom and ahima seems to have faltered at that point he couldn't bring himself to tell the king the tragic news that absalom had been killed by joab despite his enthusiasm despite his eagerness to bring the king the good news and it was good news david's enemies had been destroyed god's enemies had been destroyed and yet he couldn't bring himself i can't help thinking here that you can be good at one thing and yet not good at another thing that's the way it is in god's kingdom i know that it's a perhaps stretching things a little bit far exegetically but i can't help thinking that you can be good at hiding in wells and yet you're when it comes to telling the king bad news you fail it must have been massively difficult for ahima's you can imagine him running back to the king and with what was for him good news and relief for israel and yet it must have dawned on him at some point between where he was and the king this is not going to be good news for david how am i going to bring myself to tell david that his son has been killed so when he eventually asked the question he just couldn't he collapsed he just couldn't do it and he he gave him some kind of general story about confusion and although he knew fine well that absalom had been killed and yet bringing that news to david

[20 : 20] was harder than it first of all appeared i guess you need a little bit more experience and maturity in life to be able to do some things ahima's was a young man and i'm sure that joab knew his limitations we should know our limitations as well god has given different gifts to different people and he has given one to do some things and another person to do other things and that's the way it is in the in the kingdom of god and in the church of the lord jesus christ and david's reaction of course when he eventually heard the news from from the cuskank from the athiopian was expected and it was natural of course it was you can't read these lines can you the close of chapter 18 without being moved or without feeling a real sense of david's sorrow if david was an ordinary man he would have had the luxury of been able to mourn for his son for as long as he wanted to but he wasn't an ordinary man he was a king the king of israel and whilst his sorrow was a real sorrow the other side of the story had to be taken into account that his son had risen against him and he had taken the kingdom away from him and the people absalom had been a traitor and a rebel and there was only one penalty for trees and the danger of course was that if joab had listened to david and if he had a he spared him he would have he would have made an exception for absalom the the penalty whether we whether we see this or understand it with our modern perspective the penalty for treason of course was always death and there could be no exception especially after absalom's track record and david had to come quickly to terms with his own position as king and he had to be persuaded to go out and face the people difficult as that was and to face the reality that in actual fact his own army had saved his life and the life of the people and it was all over just like that the rebellion that threatened the well-being in the future of israel was finally quashed how quickly the crisis of the moment disappears and how quickly a life is ended just like that a young man full of promise and potential has come to an end we read all the time about young lives that come to an end at an early stage we read about accidents we read about illnesses and events that claim the lives of young people all over the world you're never too young to die but you can't help thinking of how needless this man's death was he brought about his own downfall because he decided early on in life that life was about him and his own exaltation he must have earlier on made a decision about where he wanted to go and what he did what he wanted to make of the few years that he had or he thought he had in this life the rise and fall of prince absalom

history is full of men who rise to power but their power however glamorous and popular and fearful only lasts a while a few moments a vapor that's all our lives are history tells us of kings and rebels who appear to be successful for a while and they last for a while and for some of them they thrive for a while and they strike fear into the hearts of their subjects and their enemies for a while but the story always ends with their death for them in the prime of life it appeared as if they were invincible especially when things were going their way but always always always it ends the same way with their death their death is not always as dramatic as absalom's but it's death nonetheless i find it really scary how many people decided to side with absalom without asking it appears who does god want on the throne instead they were caught up with a buzz of the moment the appetite for change and above all the celebrity status of the new kid because he happened to fit the picture his looks seemed to win him huge popularity his charisma and his presence if you'd saw him you'd instantly recognize him and that was deliberate he milked his looks he weighed his own hair and made no secret of how much he had he had a statue built for himself a monument built for himself he clearly had great plans for himself it's the same today by the way except the celebrities are not kings or princes they're actors and singers but the pride is still the same and the following is still just as as worshipful still as dedicated the attraction is the same and the appeal is just as powerful no sometimes even more powerful with today's multimedia presentation of celebrity 1995 20 years ago can you believe it 20 years ago

Michael Jackson was the flavor of the month he was by far the most elusive the most secretive the most compelling celebrity in the world this was the very height of his fame he recorded an album that year that cost him 50 million dollars and the same year he erected a massive statue of guess who himself whenever he appeared hundreds of thousands of fans would flock to see him and hear him and to worship literally worship the ground that he stood on he was able to command a godlike following it was quite scary I remember it well because we had young children at the time and yet a few years later he died in the most pathetic circumstances an ordinary lonely broken sad young man desperate for the medication that would ease his pain and do you know what the world has forgotten him you ask anyone in the up and coming generation who Michael Jackson was and they won't be able to tell you so that's the way it is despite the hysteria the crowds the following the adulation and the worship it's all gone it's all been redirected to the latest flavor of the month whoever that is because where worship is directed in the wrong place it can never ever be satisfied there is only one man who is worth worshipping and giving your life to the man who came to earth from heaven and who is

God and Lord of all the king who the wise men came to worship at his birth but whose reign for a while was obscured because his glory was veiled Absalom tried to elevate himself to the position of king but Jesus had a right to command honour and glory as the son of God and yet he chose to set that aside in order to become a servant and to give his life as a sacrifice and as a ransom for our sin and to rise again triumphant over the grave and do you know that it's Jesus who will still be worshipped when every other great hero and villain in this world when every celebrity when every important and influential figure the people who commanded a following in this world when they're all dead and forgotten his kingdom will last forever and ever he is the rightful king he is the

God anointed and the God appointed king and now is the time tonight to invest in the kingdom of God and so I'm asking tonight once again we've been asking this question several times who is your king who do you worship who are you following whose side are you on following Jesus is not always the flavor of the month in fact it hardly ever is following Jesus means denying yourself and taking up your cross daily and following Jesus for some people it means persecution for some people it means being marginalized being ostracized for many people it means standing alone lonely in the crowd having to face the laughter and the derision of the crowd and the unpopularity

[31 : 55] Jesus has never been popular and yet what you need to decide tonight is is he the way and the truth and the life is he the God appointed king because if he is then come what may I must follow him because that's what my life is about it's about God it's about filling that God shaped void in my heart that only God can fill and only God can satisfy Absalom leaves us with a challenge as to whose side we are on which king we follow and give ourselves to is it Jesus or is it someone else may God grant that it will be Jesus that will fill us and save us and forgive us and give us that reason to live and reason to glory in him and in him alone let's bow our heads and pray our father in heaven we thank you for your word to us this evening and we thank you lord that your word points us as always in the direction of Jesus even when there is such tragedy and when there is such conflict as we've been reading our father we pray that you will bless these thoughts to us and challenge us by them we pray in Jesus name amen we're going to sing now in closing in psalm number 145 the second version of the psalm psalm 145 we're going to sing the that's in the traditional version of the psalm and it's page 445 and we're going to sing 17 to the end the last four stanzas the tune is Warrington psalm 145 the lord is just in his ways all and holy in his works each one he's near to all that on him call who call in truth on him alone psalm 145 the second version of the psalm verse 17 to the end of the psalm and we'll stand to sing the lord is just in his ways all and holy in his works each one he's near to all that on him call who call in truth on him alone

God will the just desire fulfill of such as to him fear and dread their cry regard and heal he will and save them in their time of need the lord preserves all more and less appear to him a loving heart but workers all of wickedness destroy will he and clean subvert therefore my mouth and lips

I'll frame to speak the praises of the lord to magnify his holy name forever let all flesh accord and now may the grace of our lord and saviour jesus christ the love of god the father and the communion fellowship of the holy spirit rest on and abide with each one of us both now and always amen to superpower the others emphasized might