

Title: Father and Son  
Text: 2 Samuel 17.27-18.18  
Theme: The complicated relationship of a father and son in a dysfunctional family  
Series: 2 Samuel  
Prop Stmtnt: The relationship of a father and son tends to have a significant influence

Read Text:

In Star Wars Episode 6 – Return of the Jedi, Luke Skywalker is face to face with his father, Darth Vader and has an opportunity to kill this powerful figure of the dark side. Instead, he tells his father, “I will not fight you.” Fathers and sons should not fight. Fathers should love, protect and enjoy their sons and sons should love, respect and enjoy their fathers. David loves his son Absalom deeply, but his love is not framed by justice and David does not protect Absalom from his own heart and therefore, there is no enjoyment of the other. Absalom on the other hand does not love, respect, nor enjoy his dad. Since chapter 13 we’ve been building to this battle. If this were an epic movie, we would expect a climactic scene where David and Absalom each other on the field of battle. The noise of war would diminish, the chaos of fighting would fade from focus as each, seeing the other, step forward into that space that will hold the future of the kingdom. We would expect a flashback to the time when David taught young Absalom to wield a sword, never have imagining it would be used against him. Now they size up the other moving slowly, like the hands of a clock orbiting around the piece of ground between them. The other fighting stops. This is the battle. But that is not what happened. Unlike Star Wars, it would have been the father who put down his sword and would have refused to fight. I think Joab knew that. I think Absalom knew that. And I think that Absalom would have killed him. After all, Absalom enthusiastically embraced two scenarios that were designed to kill David. David’s love for a son who betrayed him would have spared him if he could and would have betrayed his own soldiers who remained loyal to him. David could not save his kingdom if he spared his son and Absalom could not be king if he spared his father. This account bleeds conflict and tragedy. There are no winners here. We read this and hang our heads because it is so hard to feel the hurt, dysfunction, anger, distrust and conflict between a father and a son. That is a flashpoint that has ignited much evil, sadness and loneliness. In the end, David will remain king, but he loses yet, another son.

This week and next displays the complicated relationship of a father and son in a dysfunctional family. I am talking to many people in this room who have had their share of disappointment and conflict with their dad. I am also talking to many people in this room who have had their share of disappointment and conflict with their kids. You remember the flashpoints, the outbursts, the accusations and in some cases the violence. Some of those memories never fade so accounts like this are hard to hear. But this is here for a reason and I want you to see that. There are three principal characters in this account. The first is David, the conflicted father.

### **1. David – the conflicted father**

David retained authority over a good bit of the army. There was enough division that he had to reassign some divisions with clear commanders. But, we begin to get the impression that while Absalom had the popular support, the experienced warriors were loyal to David and this would be a deciding factor. So, on the one hand, we have David at the beginning of the chapter taking charge. He is the one who musters the men. He is the one who reset the command structure with a third of the army under Joab, a third under Abishai and a third under Ittai the Gittite. Then David himself said that he would go into battle, but they will not let him do this, so David steps back from that.

Verse 4 is incredibly sad. David is watching the parade of troops as they pass by him, probably saluting him as they head off into battle for him, but they are heading into battle to fight and kill fellow countrymen and most importantly to defeat and kill Absalom. Once the troops are assembled, David is expected to give the rally charge and final encouragement for the mission. Here the conflict in David comes into full view. His role as a king is taken over by his role as a father. He tells his commanders in earshot of the troops to deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom. What is that supposed to mean? How do you deal gently with someone who is hellbent on killing you? The mission of the army was to win and in order to win Absalom had to lose. The insurrection had to be killed which meant Absalom had to be killed so that there was no possibility that his coup could survive. But David just gave the order to protect Absalom. At the same time, that statement sounds like David is confident that his men will prevail and that they will encounter a defeated Absalom. So, maybe there is some confidence and a word of caution. But who wants to be in David's shoes? Who wants to be king if you have to deal with things like this?

There are too many times when the roles you have in life collide. Can you imagine being a general who has to order troops into a suicide mission that will, in the end, be a critical piece to winning the war but all the while knowing that your son is in that unit, and he will likely be killed? In David's mind he had to choose between being a king and being a dad. He had already lost one son, Amnon, and likely Chileab as well. We can't blame him for thinking that he could not go through anything close to that again. I am often on the opposite side of our President's perspective, policies, politics and practices. But I do see him as a person. In December of 1972, six weeks after he was first elected to the senate, his wife and 1 month old daughter were killed in a car wreck. His sons Beau and Hunter were critically injured but survived. However, Beau died in 2015 from cancer. There has been a lot of attention on the mess that Hunter has made of the "first family" and we are aware of the many accusations of preferential treatment and sweetheart deals. Why would the President show such loyalty to a son who keeps causing him so many problems? Why would a king be sympathetic to a son who was trying to kill him?

David's dilemma was real. If he lost, his reign and life would be over and the nation would be under the rule of a monster. If he won, his son would likely die and David may not want to keep living. David was in an awful position that day. Beloved, these are the moments, the events, the griefs that I would love to shield you from. These are the griefs and pains that I never want you to go through, which is why I seek to warn you about matters of sexual purity, faithfulness, integrity and humility. David, was that one night back in chapter 11 worth all of this? Of course

not. But while David's sins made Absalom's sins convenient, Absalom was in the end, 100% responsible for his choices and this is the disgraceful end of arrogance.

## **2. Absalom – the disgraced son**

Absalom began his day with bravado. He was the self-proclaimed king and his newly acquired army was ready to fight for him. If Absalom had any second thoughts about going to war against his dad, it is not recorded. The fact is, there is very little recorded here about the actual battle. We know that David's army was on the defensive (v.6), which tends to be an advantage, particularly if you have the high ground. We also know that Absalom's army was defeated by the servants of David (v.7) and we know that this was a large-scale battle, with at least 20,000 troops who died. So clearly this was a battle that involved tens of thousands of soldiers. But we don't have much information about the location besides the forest of Ephraim and the fact that most of the soldiers died from the forest conditions and not from the sword. That is not a minor point, because it says to me that Absalom's army was not prepared. The narrator mentions in 17.25 that Absalom had appointed Amasa (a relative of Joab's to be his commander), so that it interesting. More on that to come. They were confident, proud, and ready to take over the world, but they were not prepared and were not ready to fight in these conditions and as a result, the battle was a complete failure. However, the narrator does not unpack all of that. He, instead tells us of the humiliating and ironic circumstances that surrounded Absalom's death.

V.9 is stunning. The very things that Absalom used to make much of himself are the very things that contributed to his embarrassing death. "And Absalom happened to meet the servants of David." 18.9a is to be understood in relationship to 17.14b. The LORD had ordained to bring harm upon Absalom. Therefore, Absalom happened to meet the servants of David, but it would not be in a contest of skills and honor. Oh no! Absalom was riding a mule when his mule went under a tree (a mighty oak or possibly a terebinth). Why was Absalom riding a mule? He was the king. He was the mighty leader who was supposed to lead his army to a glorious victory that day and the mule set him up where his forces could see him and set him apart. But as the mule was running, it ran under a tree. As far as the mule was concerned that was not a problem because the mule could fit under the tree. The mule obviously could care less about the consequences of that for the unfortunate dude on his back. Absalom was probably looking back at the time, because he was probably running for his life when the mule went under the tree and Absalom became painfully ensnared in the branches.

It is easy to assume that because Absalom had such long hair, that it was his hair that got caught in the tree. It may have, but the text says that it was his head that was stuck, so I assume that his head was wedged in some branches, possibly paralyzed and his hair tangled up as well. Either way, he was stuck and couldn't get out. It is very possible that Ahithophel and Absalom were both hanging from trees at the same time. Ahithophel on purpose, and Absalom by accident. "The mule that was under him went on." The mule did not care.

V.10. "And a certain man saw it and told Joab." Joab along with 10 of his armor-bearers went and sure enough, the self-proclaimed king could not save himself and was hanging, defenseless.

It's hard to imagine that Joab didn't say something, but if he did it is not recorded. What is recorded is that he thrust three javelins into Absalom's heart. His armor bearers finished him off. Absalom was praised for his beautiful face and hair. His regal mount only added to the image of power and esteem. In the end, they not only could not save him, they were actually what betrayed him as he tried to betray his father. The irony is not done. Absalom had already built a memorial for himself by constructing a pillar in the King's Valley. That was his image of himself. Absalom lived for Absalom. He lived to make himself great and wanted people to think he was great even in death, so he built his own eulogy. This pillar was his image of himself.

But this is reality. His actual memorial is a pile of rocks that cover his body in a pit in the forest. Achan was buried under a pile of rocks. The king of Ai was buried under a pile of rocks. The 5 Canaanite kings in Joshua 10 were hanged, then buried under a pile of rocks. Now, Absalom. In so many ways, Absalom's story illustrates the results of living to make much of yourself. Absalom was in love with himself. Some would be tempted to think that he had great mental health since his self-esteem was off the charts. Self-esteem is not a sign of good mental health. Godly, gospel-driven humility is. All those things that give you "glory" cannot save you. They cannot sustain you and in so many cases, will actually turn on you. It is so easy to put your hope in your beauty if you are beautiful, in your brains, if you are smart, in your friends, if they tell you that you are wonderful, in your strength, if you are healthy, in your influence, if you have money and position. But, putting your hope in those, and assuming that your happiness is safe in them is like trying to carry water in a bucket that has holes on the bottom. It leaks! Your contentment, joy, security and happiness are not safe in those. And in order to maintain the illusion that you have it all together, you have to keep looking to your world to pour more water into your bucket.

Absalom is a poster child for a wasted life. He had all of the opportunities and privileges but thought that these meant that he was great. Contrast that with Paul who also had opportunities and privileges, but who said (Philippians 3) that we "put no confidence in the flesh." He describes what he means by that by listing some of the things that he was tempted to find his identity in, such as his pedigree as a Jew, a Hebrew of Hebrews he calls it. Then his performance and morality. He was a Pharisee who kept a rigid interpretation of the law and was considered to be blameless. In terms of his zeal and commitment, he was the prosecutor and the executioner against those deemed to be in violation of the law, like the NT believers. *"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."*

### **3. Joab – the shrewd opportunist**

The third character is Joab. This guy is really hard to figure out. There are times when his loyalty to David is so solid that David knows he can trust him, no matter what. It was Joab who carried out his orders and let Uriah die in battle. It was Joab who knew that Absalom was going to be a

problem and tried to bring about a reconciliation. Joab is trying to navigate the complicated relationship between a broken father and a sinful son. This is hard! Next week, we will see another event where Joab knew what David needed to do and forced David to act in order to save the kingdom. But here, Joab directly disobeys David. Why? Did he know David well enough to know that if Absalom lived, then David would let Absalom rise again as a threat? Did he know that the political reality was such that in order for this rebellion to be crushed, Absalom had to die and David did not have it in him to give that order? Was Joab willing to do what David could not do and let it rest on his shoulders? Was this a brave man who, like a Chuck Colson was willing to go to prison in order to cover up the crimes of his boss? Or, was it something else? Did Joab do all of these things because Joab's position and power depended on David? If David was not in power, Joab would be off the scene. David's position as king was Joab's oxygen. In order for him to survive, David had to be king. 2<sup>nd</sup> born, 3<sup>rd</sup> born, cousins, nephews, are all part of the inner circle, but not the innermost circle. They are related to power, and so close to power, but they cannot ever get it. They see the failures and curse the fate that gave the royal line to others, who are so frustratingly close. They are close enough that they are trusted, employed, and in the know, but they will never be actually close enough. They don't actually have power, so they have to stay in favor of those who do. My conclusion is that Joab is a shrewd opportunist. The unnamed soldier who reported Absalom's capture by the tree to Joab knew that Joab would not defend him before David. He did not trust Joab and told him so. He. I am not sure that we should either.

What do we make of all this? There is no hero here. As I have noted, not much has changed. The more insight we get into David's family and inner circle, the uglier it gets, and he is one of the good ones! Listen to those who are close to our past two presidents, and it's pretty bad as well. But it isn't just us. We could make a list of some major countries like Brazil, Russia, England, France, Canada, Mexico, Iran, Israel and Argentina and hear the same stories. We do not live in a stable world. What is our hope? Well, it is not David and certainly not Absalom. But there is a Father/Son relationship that is so beautiful and so compelling, and so perfect and so delightful, and so powerful and so eternal that it invites us to believe, to delight and to enjoy.

The story of the Bible is the story of a Father's perfect love and delight in his Son so that he designs a world in order that there would be millions of people who are beautiful images of his Son. The Son perfectly loves, delights in and trusts his Father so much that he will do anything for his Father. This Son died for his Father, even as he died for us. Christ died in order to satisfy the just and righteous wrath of his Father against our rebellion, so that we could be forgiven and made children of God. The Father was so pleased with the perfect trust and obedience of his Son that he declared him worthy of all honor and glory and has given to him all of the kingdoms of this world as his very own kingdom. The Spirit gladly navigates the relationship of the Father and the Son and delights in it so much that he seeks to draw us to see it, savor it, love it, trust in it, long for it, and anticipate enjoying all of its benefits when we with perfect vision and complete knowledge finally enjoy God as we were meant to. Don't you want to know that love? Don't you want to experience that satisfaction and delight forever? It is yours by faith in Christ.