

We come to the last week of our 9 week series of OT lessons about King David. In the past weeks, we have seen many attributes of David's character. Most of these attributes are ones that were prized in David's culture as the epitome of masculinity. Most of these masculine attributes are prized in our culture as well.

David was a leader. People rallied to him. David was successful. He defeated all of his people's external enemies. He expanded his country's borders to their greatest extent. He built a new capital city. David was tough. He was a warrior who personally killed at least 15 men in hand to hand combat, and who led his troops to kill tens of thousands more. David was handsome, something that was prized, then as now.

One thing on the list that was very much regarded as masculine attribute in David's time. We don't necessarily regard it as being overly masculine now, but they did then. David was an artist. He was a musician and composer. In his day, that, along with all of the other attributes meant that David was a man's man, the epitome of masculinity.

But there was a big hole in David's personality. It's sometimes overlooked in our time. It was certainly missing in David's time. And it was definitely missing in David personally. That attribute is being a good father.

David had his problems with lust. David had his problems with abusing his own power. But the place where he did the most damage was in his role as father. David was not a good father. And his family, and his whole country, paid the price.

Scripture suggests that David was usually rather indifferent as a father. He basically ignored his children. And when we do see him paying attention to them, he's usually overly indulgent. There's little sense of discipline, or boundaries, or moral guidance. That's not a good mix.

And there's a final ingredient in the recipe for tragedy. Timing. David's most heroic period of life took place before he had children. His worst mistakes in life were made while his children were growing up. Thus his children see David at his worst.

There's a wonderful lyric from the musical *Into the Woods*. It goes,
"Careful the things you say, children will listen.
Careful the things you do, children will see. And learn...
Children will look to you for which way to turn,
To learn what to be."¹

That's what's happened with David's children. They see him at his worst. And sadly, they pick up some of David's worst attributes.

The sad story begins with the oldest son, David's heir apparent, Amnon. Amnon falls head over heels for his half-sister (same dad, David, different mothers). This son has watched

¹ Stephen Sondheim, James Lapine

the way his father acts, and so he acts the same way. David lusted after Bathsheba, and he took her. So Amnon tricks his half-sister into coming to his chamber, and there he rapes her. And after that he wants nothing to do with her. Like father, like son.

After the incident, we're told, "When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, because he was his firstborn."

The girl's full brother, same father and same mother, is Absalom. Absalom is absolutely furious. He bears hatred in his heart for his half brother Amnon from that point on. But for two years, he does nothing. Then, when Amnon least suspects it, Absalom has his servants kill his brother to avenge his sister.

Absalom runs away. David grieves. But after 3 years, David brings his son back to Jerusalem. Yet sadly, David have nothing to do with Absalom. He won't see his son for another two full years. And so the family festers.

Absalom, like David, is described as a very handsome man. In fact, we're told that no one in Israel looked better. And Absalom's hair is singled out for its beauty. Absalom wore it long, and only cut it once a year. The young Absalom is very much like the young David.

And people start gravitating to him, just as a generation before, people had left King Saul and followed David.

Then Prince Absalom starts judging cases. He sets himself up at the gates of Jerusalem and offers to act as judge so that people won't have to mess with going to the palace to see the King. In doing so, he is blatantly usurping the authority of his father, King David. But David does nothing to stop it.

Then after four years, Absalom decides to overthrow his father. Absalom raises an army from the people in the northern part of the kingdom. And David flees from his capital with his tail between his legs. Absalom captures Jerusalem, and he humiliates his father by sleeping with 10 of his father's concubines in public. The message is clear, "David is now powerless. I'm in charge here."

David is on the run for awhile, but then he puts together an army from the southern tribes. And he meets his son in battle, which is where we pick up with our OT lesson today, 2Sam ch18.

David gives clear instructions. He doesn't want Absalom to be hurt. So he commands, ch18, v5 "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And we're told that all the people heard him give his commanders that order.

We're told in v7 that the battle is a rout. David's army slaughters Absalom's army. v9, Absalom flees, and as he's riding through the forest, he gets his head tangled in the branches of an oak tree, and his mule runs out from under him, leaving him suspended there.

General Joab hears about it and goes to the tree. Our reading skips the verse, but in v14, he takes 3 spears and stabs Absalom. Then v15, General Joab's armor bearers finish Absalom off. There is a sad irony here. General Joab was the one who had obeyed David's rather sleazy order to have Bathsheba's husband killed. Now he disobeys David's very clear order to spare his son.

v31 They take the news of the victory to David. v32 All David is worried about is his son: "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And when he's told that Absalom is dead, his grief is tremendous.

He says, end of v33, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

It's one of the saddest lines in scripture. It's especially sad because it's too late. David is willing to die in Absalom's place. But that's not in his power. If only... if only. If only David had been a real father to Amnon and to Absalom earlier on things could have turned out differently. But David was indifferent and overindulgent. And then, when it's too late, he grieves for his dead sons.

That's a good reminder to all of us. You fathers, don't make the mistake David made. Being a man is not just about success or leadership or toughness. Being a man is about being a father to your children, now, not later. It's about quality time and a sufficient quantity of time.

The lesson of David is that the time to be a father is now, not later. Whether your children are young or grown, the time to be a father is now. The lesson for all of us is not to wait until it's too late to mend a broken relationship. The time is now. Seek healing. Seek forgiveness. Don't wait. Do it now.

The story of David's family is especially tragic, and not just for them, but for the country as well. Absalom's revolt, with soldiers from the north fighting soldiers from the south plants the seeds for a complete and total civil war that will take place during the reign of David's grandson. All that David has built will be lost within 2 generations.

And there will be one last sad chapter in David's life. David has lost three sons. There are two sons left. His favorite is the younger son, Solomon, son of Bathsheba. At the end of his life, David tells Solomon two things:

1. He tells Solomon, follow God, remain faithful to God, walk in his ways all the days of your life. That's the kind of thing you expect to hear in scripture.
2. He says something that you might expect to hear from *The Godfather*. He tells Solomon, to consolidate your throne, after I die, kill your brother's chief advisor, General Joab.

After David's death, Solomon heeds David's second command. He kills General Joab, and he kills his brother.

Sadly, Solomon ignores David's first command, about remaining faithful to God. Solomon has learned about ruthlessness and the use and abuse of power from his father. But

sadly, he doesn't share his father's level of faith in God. Thus Solomon will begin his reign as one of Israel's greatest kings, and end it as one of the very worst. But that's another story.

In the meantime, we draw the story of David to a close. A great man, with greatly human flaws. He did many things well. He did some things wrong.

I appreciate David's example, because I want to do the right thing, but I know that not everything I do will be right. As such, I am deeply indebted to the writer of 1st and 2nd Samuel. He doesn't show me a man who is a fairy-tale hero. He shows me a man in all his glory and all his flaws. He shows us David, warts and all. He also shows us David's family, with all of its pain and messiness. Pain and messiness are part of living within real families. Like David, we may live with great regrets. Like David, we will have to live with the hurt that comes with life, and with the knowledge that we can't fix everything. And like David, when we slog through the messiness of life, we must ultimately put our trust in the living God.

God grieves over our bad choices in life, and loves us anyway. And God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. One of my favorite writers has a statement about David and Absalom and God. I'll conclude with his words:

"A cross is raised outside of the capital city. Upon it hangs a beloved son, hanging there not because of his rebellion against his father, but rather because of our rebellion. The Father gives everything for his kingdom, even his own Son. The cross does not set everything right. The cross does not erase the seriousness of the evils we commit. Rather, the cross forgives and makes it possible for life to continue, despite the tragedy. David said that he would have given his life to save his son from death. But even kings can't do that. No, it takes a God to do that. At Calvary, on the cross, God's whole, tragic human family was gathered, embraced, saved by a Father who, in grief, loves us yet."²

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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² William Willimon, "A Tragic Family"