

The Life of David

David Mourns for Absalom

2 Samuel 18:1-19:8

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Scripture

King David's third son, Absalom, had staged a rebellion against him. David and his loyal supporters fled Jerusalem. The Lord provided Hushai to thwart the counsel of Ahithophel so that David was able to escape over the Jordan River and get to the city of Mahanaim. Absalom gathered together the army of Israel and they encamped in the land of Gilead. During this time, others loyal to David joined him to battle against Absalom and his army. Sadly, twenty thousand soldiers died, and Absalom was also killed. This account tells us of Absalom's death and David's mourning for his son, Absalom.

Let's read about David mourning for Absalom in 2 Samuel 18:1-19:8:

¹Then David mustered the men who were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. ²And David sent out the army, one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the command of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the men, "I myself will also go out with you." ³But the men said, "You shall not go out. For if we flee, they will not care about us. If half of us die, they will not care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us. Therefore it is better that you send us help from the city." ⁴The king said to them, "Whatever seems best to you I will do." So the king stood at the side of the gate, while all the army marched out by hundreds and by thousands. ⁵And the king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders about Absalom.

⁶So the army went out into the field against Israel, and

the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. ⁷ And the men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the loss there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. ⁸ The battle spread over the face of all the country, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword.

⁹ And Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak, and his head caught fast in the oak, and he was suspended between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. ¹⁰ And a certain man saw it and told Joab, "Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak." ¹¹ Joab said to the man who told him, "What, you saw him! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have been glad to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt." ¹² But the man said to Joab, "Even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I would not reach out my hand against the king's son, for in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, 'For my sake protect the young man Absalom.' ¹³ On the other hand, if I had dealt treacherously against his life (and there is nothing hidden from the king), then you yourself would have stood aloof." ¹⁴ Joab said, "I will not waste time like this with you." And he took three javelins in his hand and thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the oak. ¹⁵ And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him.

¹⁶ Then Joab blew the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained them. ¹⁷ And they took Absalom and threw him into a great pit in the forest and raised over him a very great heap of stones. And all Israel fled every one to his own home. ¹⁸ Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself the pillar that is in the King's Valley, for he said, "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance." He called the pillar after his own name, and it is called Absalom's monument to this day.

¹⁹ Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said, "Let me run and carry news to the king that the Lord has delivered him from the hand of his enemies." ²⁰ And Joab said to him, "You

are not to carry news today. You may carry news another day, but today you shall carry no news, because the king's son is dead." ²¹ Then Joab said to the Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have seen." The Cushite bowed before Joab, and ran. ²² Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said again to Joab, "Come what may, let me also run after the Cushite." And Joab said, "Why will you run, my son, seeing that you will have no reward for the news?" ²³ "Come what may," he said, "I will run." So he said to him, "Run." Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the plain, and outran the Cushite.

²⁴ Now David was sitting between the two gates, and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and when he lifted up his eyes and looked, he saw a man running alone. ²⁵ The watchman called out and told the king. And the king said, "If he is alone, there is news in his mouth." And he drew nearer and nearer. ²⁶ The watchman saw another man running. And the watchman called to the gate and said, "See, another man running alone!" The king said, "He also brings news." ²⁷ The watchman said, "I think the running of the first is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok." And the king said, "He is a good man and comes with good news."

²⁸ Then Ahimaaz cried out to 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." ²⁹ And the king said, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent the king's servant, your servant, I saw a great commotion, but I do not know what it was." ³⁰ And the king said, "Turn aside and stand here." So he turned aside and stood still.

³¹ And behold, the Cushite came, and the Cushite said, "Good news for my lord the king! For the Lord has delivered you this day from the hand of all who rose up against you." ³² The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And the Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man." ³³ And the king was deeply

moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

19 It was told Joab, “Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom.”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.”³ And the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle.⁴ The king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, “O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!”⁵ Then Joab came into the house to the king and said, “You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who have this day saved your life and the lives of your sons and your daughters and the lives of your wives and your concubines,⁶ because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you. For you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you, for today I know that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased.⁷ Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants, for I swear by the Lord, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night, and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now.”⁸ Then the king arose and took his seat in the gate. And the people were all told, “Behold, the king is sitting in the gate.” And all the people came before the king. (2 Samuel 18:1-19:8)

Introduction

Historians tell us that the Black Plague or Black Death ran in various forms from 1347 to 1665 and killed at least 25 million people in Europe and from 75 million to 200 million worldwide. The symptoms were “flu-like” after an incubation period of 3-7 days.

In 17th century England was a village called Eyam. In September 1665, a tailor’s assistant brought a bunch of flea-infested blankets from London. Soon, many of the estimated 800 residents

of Eyam were dying from the disease. Eyam's rector, William Mompesson, along with the previous rector, decided to quarantine the village to contain the disease. Eyam lay on an important trade route between two prominent cities, and if the current plague was brought to those cities, many more would die. Together they persuaded the villagers to voluntarily self-quarantine.

According to eyewitness accounts:

A quarantine cordon was established with a one-mile radius marked by a ring of stones. For 14 months nobody went in or out of the village. Food was left at the boundary stone by nearby townspeople in exchange for gold coins submerged in vinegar, which villagers believed would disinfect them. The death-rate skyrocketed.... One woman, Elizabeth Hancock, buried six of her children and her husband inside a month.

To limit infections within Eyam, church services were held outdoors and some villagers left their homes to live outdoors nearby. By the plague's end, 260 of Eyam's estimated 800 residents died, more than double the mortality rate of the plague in London. The villagers' self-sacrifice had worked. The plague never spread to nearby towns and, 14 months later, in November 1667, the quarantine was lifted.

An Eyam survivors' descendant wrote in a history of the village that succeeding generations of Eyam villagers should admire their ancestors: "who in a sublime, unparalleled resolution gave up their lives — yea: doomed themselves to pestilential death to save the surrounding country."¹

I mention this story for two reasons. First, it is interesting in light of our current worldwide pandemic. But, second, and this is my main reason for mentioning the story, is the note that Elizabeth Hancock "buried six of her children and her husband inside a month." It is not common for parents to bury their children. The normal pattern is for children to bury their parents.

¹ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2020/march/17th-century-villagers-sacrificed-their-lives-to-save-other.html>.

By this time in our study of David's life, he had already buried two (and possibly three) of his children. Scholars believe that Chileab most likely died as a youngster. The child born to David and Bathsheba died at birth. And Amnon died by Absalom's hand. So, David's heart must have been heavy.

Now David faced his rebellious son, Absalom, who wanted to kill him so that he could rule as king over all Israel. David, however, had time to muster his troops and, being vastly more experienced in military matters, knew that he would be victorious.

Lesson

Second Samuel 18:1-19:8 shows us a father's inordinate sorrow for a rebellious son.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Death of a Son (18:1-18)
2. The Despair of a Father (18:19-19:8)

I. The Death of a Son (18:1-18)

First, let's look at the death of a son.

David was east of the Jordan River in a town called Mahanaim. Second Samuel 18:1 says, **“Then David mustered the men who were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds.”** A few days had elapsed and those loyal to David came from all over the country. David divided his army into three divisions, **“one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the command of Ittai the Gittite”** (18:2). David indicated that he would go out with his army, as he had done countless times before. However, his leaders urged him to stay in Mahanaim, for they said, **“You shall not go out. For if we flee, they will not care about**

us. If half of us die, they will not care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us. Therefore it is better that you send us help from the city” (18:3). David’s men clearly cared about their leader. So, David remained in Mahanaim.

As the troops marched out of the city, David ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, **“Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders about Absalom** (18:5). David’s command to **“deal gently”** with Absalom was a poor command to give to his military leaders. David seemed to be more concerned about his son than about the lives of his soldiers.

General Douglas MacArthur hated war, but he hated appeasement even more. His view was that war was a last resort. But, once engaged in war, then one had to soundly defeat—and not “deal gently”—the enemy.

David’s army went to battle against Absalom’s army in forest of Ephraim. David’s army, most likely made up of more experienced soldiers and certainly with more gifted military leaders, defeated Absalom’s army. In fact, twenty thousand men were killed.

Verse 9a says, **“And Absalom happened to meet the servants of David.”** The word **“happened”** gives the impression that Absalom’s meeting the servants of David came about by chance. But, of course, that is not the case. Nothing happens “by chance.” God orchestrated this event to accomplish his sovereign purpose.

Verse 9b continues, **“Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak, and his head caught fast in the oak, and he was suspended between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on.”** It is commonly held that it was Absalom’s hair—of which he was excessively proud—that got caught in the branches. However, the text does not say that. It says that **“his head caught fast in the oak.”** It is more likely, I think, that Absalom got knocked out and caught in a V-shaped branch.

Joab was told that Absalom was hanging in a tree. He hurried to the tree and **“took three javelins in his hand and thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the oak. And ten young men, Joab’s armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him”** (18:14-15).

With Absalom dead, Joab called for his soldiers to stop pursuing Absalom’s army. Verse 17a says, **“And they took Absalom and threw him into a great pit in the forest and raised over him a very great heap of stones.”** Absalom was unceremoniously buried in the forest and not in the lavish monument that he had erected outside Jerusalem in his own honor.

Regarding Absalom’s death, Richard Phillips concludes:

Absalom was a faithless son who died because of God’s faithfulness to his father. Absalom was born an heir to the glory of God’s covenant with David, but seeking a glory of his own, he died in shame. Absalom placed his hope in evil scheming and in the strength of human flesh. He therefore perished, as Paul would later say of the Gentiles, “having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).²

II. The Despair of a Father (18:19-19:8)

And second, let’s examine the despair of a father.

When Ahimaaz desired to run and tell David that his army had been victorious over Absalom and his army, Joab at first refused to let him go. But after Joab sent a Cushite to give the news to David, Ahimaaz again requested that he be allowed to carry the news to David. Joab relented and granted Ahimaaz permission. Taking a different route, **“Ahimaaz ran by the way of the plain, and outran the Cushite”** (18:23).

² Richard D. Phillips, *2 Samuel*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Iain M. Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), 314–315.

A watchman informed David that there was a runner coming to him. That would most likely mean that David's forces were victorious because if his army had been defeated, lots of men would be returning to the city. Then the watchman spotted Ahimaaz running toward them. David now believed that the news was good.

Ahimaaz arrived first and **cried out to the king, "All is well"** (18:28a). But David wanted to know about Absalom. **"Is it well with the young man Absalom?"** (18:29a). Ahimaaz said he did not know. Then the Cushite arrived. He also told David that the revolt had been stopped. Again, David wanted to know about Absalom. And the Cushite answered, **"May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man"** (18:32). Then we read one of the most poignant expressions of grief in the entire Bible, **"And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!'"** (18:33).

When I was at seminary, my preaching professor, Dr. David Larsen, preached this text in a chapel service. What I particularly remember is his reading of David's cry in this verse. I can still hear it ringing in my head, as he read it with pathos and emotion, **"O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"**

When David's returning, victorious army heard of David's inordinate sorrow for Absalom, they entered Mahanaim stealthily, and the day of victory was turned into a day of mourning.

Then Joab came to David and accused him of loving those who hated him and hating those who loved him. In fact, he went so far as to say, **"For you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you, for today I know that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased"** (19:6b). He warned David that if he did

not change his behavior before the people and comfort them, then all the people would desert him. David heeded Joab's counsel, arose, sat at the gate, and comforted the people.

What caused David such great despair over the death of his son, Absalom? Dale Ralph Davis gives us the answer. He writes, "It is David's guilt that inflames his grief. Nathan had assured David that he would not die but that David's infant son would die (12:14). And he did (12:19). Then Amnon was murdered (ch. 13), and now Absalom has perished. David knew that his sin had set the sword loose in his household."³ That is why David cried out in despair, **"Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"** David was guilty of sin (against Bathsheba and Uriah) and yet Absalom suffered the consequences of David's sin. That did not negate Absalom's own sin against his father. David wished that he had died because he knew that he deserved to die.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed David mourning for Absalom in 2 Samuel 18:1-19:8, let us turn to Jesus who died in our stead.

This story points us to David's Greater Son, Jesus Christ.

We are all like Absalom. We are faithless and rebellious. We do not want to submit to the kingship of Jesus. In our revolt against him, we want him out of our lives.

But Jesus is the king whom God has anointed to rule and to reign forever and ever. And when he hung on the cross, he cried out, as it were, "Would I had died instead of you, O Freddy, my son, my son!" And then he died in my stead. He died so that I could be forgiven and reconciled to the heavenly Father.

If you have never done so, turn to Jesus today who died instead of all who acknowledge and confess their sin to him. Amen.

³ Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 235–236.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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