

2 Samuel 18:24-33 (NRSV)

[David has been king of the united Israel for a long time. God had promised him that a king from his family would sit on the throne of Israel forever. Yet now, his son, Absalom, has led a rebellion against his father and seized control of Jerusalem and the throne. David has mustered a counter-attack and awaits word of the climactic battle.]

<sup>24</sup>Now David was sitting between the two gates. The sentinel went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and when he looked up, he saw a man running alone. <sup>25</sup>The sentinel shouted and told the king. The king said, "If he is alone, there are tidings in his mouth." He kept coming, and drew near. <sup>26</sup>Then the sentinel saw another man running; and the sentinel called to the gatekeeper and said, "See, another man running alone!" The king said, "He also is bringing tidings." <sup>27</sup>The sentinel said, "I think the running of the first one is like the running of Ahimaaz son of Zadok." The king said, "He is a good man, and comes with good tidings."

<sup>28</sup>Then Ahimaaz cried out to the king, "All is well!" He prostrated himself before the king with his face to the ground, and said, "Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king." <sup>29</sup>The king said, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I do not know what it was." <sup>30</sup>The king said, "Turn aside, and stand here." So he turned aside, and stood still.

<sup>31</sup>Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For the LORD has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you." <sup>32</sup>The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man."

<sup>33</sup>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!"

*When is a victory a loss? How can a comeback lead to inconsolable grief? David's comeback story is a cautionary tale to all families.*

In 279BC, the Greek king Pyrrhus battled the Romans at Asculum. A year earlier he had won a difficult and costly victory, losing more men than he could easily replace. After this latest such victory, an officer expressed joy at the triumph. Pyrrhus turned to him and said.

"Another such victory will undo me!" Ever since, a victory that is ruinous for the victor has been called a "Pyrrhic victory." For example, Santa Anna's destruction of the Alamo was a Pyrrhic victory, as was the Battle of Thermopylae, now of "The 300" fame.

For years, King David had been tormented by his son, Absalom. The lust and violence that David brought into his own household had borne evil fruit among his sons. (If you don't know the basics of Absalom's story, see the page three text box.)

### Reading Bible Stories

It can be pretty hard to know what to make of some Old Testament stories. Here are a few tips from Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart:

1. The stories tell us what happened, not what ought to have happened. There is not a clear moral to every story.
2. What people do in these narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Sometimes it is just the opposite!
3. All the stories are selectively told. Every writer has to pick and choose what details to include, even how the story will be told.
4. The stories are not written to answer all our theological questions. They may raise as many questions for you as they answer.
5. Do your best to close some of the historical and cultural distance between our world and ancient Israel. A few basic reference tools, like a Bible dictionary, will be helpful in this.

Here are two simple questions to keep in mind when you read Old Testament stories. First, what does the passage tell us about God's character, his activities, or his will? Second, what does the passage tell us about the story of Israel (the people of God)?

For more on this, see Fee and Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. It is written for laypeople and is excellent.

The self-inflicted family tragedies had led to the unimaginable. Absalom had worked craftily for four years, building support, diminishing his father, all leading to this moment of open rebellion. Absalom has now raised an army and seized David's throne.

Try to put yourself in David's place. His life was once on an ever upward trajectory. The hero who defeated Goliath. God's anointed. The one from whose household the king of Israel would forever come. Yet, in unthinking lust, he had taken Bathsheba and then arranged the murder of her husband. Without considering the consequences, David had brought violence and murder into his own house. What sort of example had he set for his sons? What had he taught them about the privileges of royal power and of its abuse? Could he have been surprised that one son had also "taken" the woman for whom he lusted? Did David not realize that there would be dire consequences from ignoring Amnon's crime? Could he not see that Absalom's murder of Amnon was foreshadowed by David's own murder of Uriah?

I think that David did understand all this, only deepening the pain he felt at Absalom's rebellion. He knew that his own hands were dirty in all this.

Though David has to flee Jerusalem when the rebellion is launched, he marshals his loyal forces, setting up a climactic battle. Before the battle, David gives explicit orders that Absalom is not to be harmed. Nonetheless, after Absalom gets stuck in a tree, Joab, David's commander, seizes on Absalom's vulnerability and kills him, bringing us to today's passage from this lengthy story.<sup>1</sup> David anxiously awaits word of the battle's outcome. Runners arrive to tell him of his victory, but also of Absalom's death, though they don't tell him how his son died.

#### The Book of Samuel

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are actually one long literary work. Ancient Hebrew scrolls couldn't hold the entire book of Samuel, so the book was copied onto two scrolls. This is true of the book of Kings and the book of Chronicles as well.

The book of Samuel tells the story of Israel's transition from the rule of judges to a monarchy, roughly 1,000 years before Jesus. During the time of the judges, the Israelites were organized into a loose confederation of the twelve tribes. Though God was to be the king of the Israelites, the people demanded a human king. Samuel warned the people that they didn't understand the consequences of their demand for a king, but the people would not relent and God let them have a king. The first was Saul. Under Saul, and then David, and then Solomon the twelve tribes were organized into a monarchy with centralized wealth and military power.

Not only do kings emerge in Israel during this time, but also prophets. Israel's kings would not have the absolute freedom typical of kings in the ancient near east. Instead, the kings of Israel were subject to God and to the covenant. Israel's prophets would hold the kings (and the people!) to account. The prophet Samuel brought God's word to King Saul. Nathan did the same for David.

David's grief is without bounds. He is inconsolable, pouring out his heart with the famous words, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" Surely, David's grief is compounded by his guilt.

Yes, David's comeback has been won. The throne is his again. But there is a cautionary tale here for all families.

John Donne famously wrote, "No man is an island." We are bound to others whether we like it or not. David's impulsive abuse of his royal power in his taking of Bathsheba put himself and his family on a long downward path into ever-deepening violence that took many years to unfold. In the same way, our actions, for good or ill, have long-lasting consequences for our own families. Violence begets violence. Abuse begets abuse. Lies beget lies . . . and love begets love.

Through it all, God remained faithful to David and his family. They would reap the consequences of their sins, but God would not cut them loose. David, this man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14) was capable of committing terrible wrongs, but none placed him outside the power of God's grace. In David's story, we again see that God is the God of not just a second chance, but of many chances.

<sup>1</sup>There are no stories in Scripture more artfully told than those of David and his sons. They begin with the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 and run through chapter 20. A good reading strategy would be to read the stories first in *The Message* and then again in a translation like the NRSV or TNIV. When you read it, don't concentrate only on the unfolding events, but also ask yourself why the writers told the stories in this way. Their sophisticated literary techniques not only make for compelling reading, they help us to grasp meaning in these stories.

## No Prodigal's Father

Though many people know the story of David and Bathsheba, or at least the Hollywood version, fewer know the story of the aftermath. Here is a brief account of the tragic tale told in 2 Samuel.

There was no romance in the story of David and Bathsheba. She was a married woman whom David saw bathing on her rooftop. He wanted her and, being king, he ordered his guards to fetch her. He took her and then sent her away. When Bathsheba turned up pregnant, David tried to cover-up his rape of her, going so far as to arrange the murder of her husband, Uriah, a distinguished commander in David's army.

Though David is God's anointed, God tells him that the violence he has perpetrated in secret on Uriah's household will now come upon David's household, for all Israel to see.

David would marry Bathsheba, though their first child died in infancy. Their second child, Solomon, would go on to be David's successor. But David also had other wives and other children, an assortment of half- and full-siblings. Some of them were born before David's self-indulgent violence against Bathsheba. See 2 Samuel 3:2-5 and 5:13-16 for partial lists of them. We get the names of the sons, but not the daughters.

David's oldest son was named Amnon. David had another son, Absalom, who had a full-sister by the name of Tamar. Amnon secretly lusted for his half-sister, Tamar, and schemed to get her alone. When he succeeded, he raped Tamar and sent her quickly away. But she did not go quietly and soon the entire palace knew what Amnon had done.

Absalom was, of course, outraged by Amnon's rape of Tamar and expected their father, the king, to punish him. But David did not, because "he loved him, for he was his firstborn" (2 Sam. 13:21). But, not surprisingly, Absalom now hated Amnon.

Absalom bided his time for two years, but then wreaked his vengeance on Amnon, having him killed at a large banquet. Absalom fled and sought the protection of his maternal grandfather, the king of Geshur. He stayed there three years and we are told that "the heart of the king (David) went out, yearning for Absalom; for he was now consoled over the death of Amnon" (2 Sam. 13:39).

Joab, David's trusted commander, knew that the king was still focused on Absalom and arranged for Absalom's return to Jerusalem. He got the king to agree to the return, but David would not agree to meet his son and that is how it stayed for two years. Absalom back in Jerusalem, but his father refusing to see him.

After two years had passed, Absalom persuaded Joab to approach the king on his behalf, and present this question: "Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still." David relented and agreed to meet with his son. The writer of 2 Samuel depicted the reunion this way: "So he came to the king and prostrated himself with his face to the ground before the king; and the king kissed Absalom." Absalom comes in submission and the king receives him with a public welcoming kiss. Though this is an act of royal protocol, there is surely something here of warmth and forgiveness.

Yet, the description is terse. David is referred to only as the "king." Where is the open-armed embrace of a father's favorite son? This welcome home contrasts with the welcoming father of Jesus' parable about a prodigal son (Luke 15), in which the father picks up the hem of his garment and runs to grab and embrace his wayward son.

There is something missing in David's welcome. The guilt of both father and son live on. Absalom's treachery will now be visited upon his own father as he tries to seize David's throne. Yet when I read the account, I'm left with the thought that David missed an opportunity for an outpouring of grace that might have broken this family's cycle of violence. David would soon wish that he had found another way forward.

## READING WITH HEART & MIND

Next week's comeback story is the greatest of all – Jesus and his resurrection.

**Monday, Matthew 27:45-28:20** Matthew probably had access to Mark when he wrote this gospel. How does his account differ?

**Tuesday, Mark 15:33-16:8** This is Mark's account which is perhaps based on Peter's eyewitness testimony.

**Wednesday, Luke 23:44-24:53** Luke also probably had access to Mark.

**Thursday, John 19:16b-20:31** What is most distinctive about this account of Jesus' comeback?

**Friday, Isaiah 53** Isaiah's portrait of the suffering servant.

**Saturday, Philippians 2:1-11** The Christ-hymn re Jesus' death and exaltation.

## Sermon Notes

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### ***Reading The Good Book Better***

#### **A new *Something Else* series continues this week**

Our series on creation and evolution revealed that the way we read the Bible shapes our understanding of evolution and other topics. Indeed, it shapes the way we see the world.

In this series, we'll look at various interpretational issues, as well as some keys to understanding the many translations that are available now.

This week: "Be Careful Where You Ask for a Doggie Bag"

Next week: "It's 10pm. Do You Know Where Your *Sitz-im-Leben* Is?"

**Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning**

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. One of the things I've learned in life is that all families have stories that they'd prefer to keep to themselves. Some families have self-inflicted wounds that strike deep and threaten to undo the family. When David takes Bathsheba and murders his husband, he sets in motion a family tragedy that would go on for years, ending in death not reconciliation.

If you haven't yet, read the page 3 text box to gain a sense of the entire story. Better yet, take the time to read 2 Samuel 11-20 in *The Message*, so you can be drawn into it. Then, imagine that David was sitting with you late in his life. What do you think would be his own perspective on the story? What lessons do you think he'd want to share with you? What do you think he'd wish he'd done differently? I can't help but see this story through the eyes of a father. How do you think Bathsheba would tell this story? She was David's queen and mother of the heir to the throne. She saw it all.

2. While fleeing Jerusalem after the start of Absalom's revolt, David restrained his men from punishing a man who stood at the roadside and cursed the king. Indeed, in those terrible days, David relied on the promises of God, saying "It may be that the LORD will look on my distress and the LORD will repay me with good for the cursing of me today" (16:12). David was willing to trust God in this. Yet, he proceeded to work through all the political and military realities of defeating the rebellion. How do we put into practice our own trust of God while we proceed to do what we think is best?