

## SECULAR PRIDE V GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

### Introduction

If we were reading the life of King David for the first time we might imagine that after God had settled his kingdom all would go well. But it was not so. First we read of the works of his dealings with Bathsheba and Uriah, where animal instinct took over from the Spirit of God. In this passage we find rebellion coming from within his family, a rebellion that almost destroyed him.

The story sounds familiar, for it shows the pride and cruelty of humanity pitted against the mercy and purpose of God. It is the same conflict on a national scale as what took place in David's private life. And that is what we face day and daily, in personal, church, and national life. As the story unfolds the evildoers appear to succeed while David, God's man, only shows weakness. We wonder, 'Where is God in all this?' – a familiar question.

It is a picture of secular pride exploiting a saint's weakness but defeated eventually by God's faithfulness. And that should encourage the saints of God when evil seems to triumph. Human help is vain, but God will fulfil his gracious purposes.

### Secular pride

It is worth considering the motives of the participants. In Amnon's case it was passion – infatuation with his sister Tamar. He was not influenced by any thought of God or of her welfare. There was no love, only lust. They are not the same, for 'love does no harm to a neighbour' (Romans 13:10).

Absalom's motive in killing his brother was revenge. Justice had not been done, and that was an obvious weakness, but God has declared, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay' (Hebrews 10:30). He had no regard for God, nor had he any regard for his father or the rest of his family. Again, love was absent.

Absalom's motive in the rebellion was personal ambition – he wanted to be king. That showed a lack of regard for God, since it was God who had set his father on the throne – not only was it a rebellion against his father, it was a rebellion against God also.

It is also worth noting the methods used. Amnon got his way through the cruel cunning of his friend Jehoiada, and his own brute force. That is reminiscent of Satan, who used deception to lure Adam into sin, and who uses force in the persecutions of God's people.

Absalom also used pretence to put Amnon in a position where he could be killed. His offer of hospitality to the king's sons seemed to be an act of kindness, and the murder was a betrayal. It reminds us of Judas who pretended love for Jesus even on the night he handed him over. When pretence is a chosen weapon we are at a loss to know who to trust. How different from the peace that comes from knowing God who cannot lie.

Absalom's pretence is emphasised in the description of Joab's friend – the one who persuaded King David to bring his son back from exile. She is described as 'a wise woman', yet what wisdom can there be in denying justice and allowing a murderer to go free? It was an act of deception to compare David's situation with her own – the two were not parallel. The Bible speaks much of wisdom – this is only being smart in order to get your own way whatever the consequences.

It is also underlined in the description of Absalom's conduct – he 'stole the hearts' of the people. He had no right to their loyalty. It contrasts with John the Baptist who wanted the people to transfer their loyalty from him to Jesus.

It was also an act of deception to take over the King's harem, an act that suggested he was in total control. That is Satan's way – 'give up, you know you have lost'.

The proud secular approach only brings misery. Tamar was the only blameless person in the story, yet she was rejected by Amnon, neglected by Absalom, and refused justice by David. Absalom's rebellion brought the keenest sorrow to his father, disrupted the entire family, and caused a bloody civil war. It also led to his own death.

If this was the only part of our story it would seem a triumph for evil. Indeed, evil seemed to be normal. And that is Satan's aim – to portray his own character as normal and God's holiness as futile. That lie of Satan is repeated around us constantly.

But what seems to be a victory brings only misery. There were no winners. Jesus spoke of Satan as coming 'only to kill, steal, and destroy' whereas he, the Good Shepherd came to bring life more abundant.

What kept David's head above water all this while? It could only have been the knowledge that God is faithful, and the promised Messiah (his own descendant) would come. That gives us a hint about how we are to handle situations where evil seems to triumph. Has the Christ come to put away sin? Then he will come again to judge the world.

### **A saint's weakness**

It has been said that all that is needed for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. That was true in David's case. Absalom exploited David's weakness.

David had responsibility for ensuring justice, both in his family (as father) and in society (as king). Without the rule of law life becomes the survival of the strongest or the most deceitful. God has delegated his authority in family, church, and state (Colossians 3:20-21; Hebrews 13:17; Romans 13:1-7). When that authority is not exercised evil is free to grow. Indeed, it encourages others to do wrong.

Being in a position of authority can be hard. In David's case it was his own family who were involved. Because he did not punish a case of rape he found himself with a case of murder. In both cases his feelings for his sons prevented him from doing his God-given duty.

He was 'very angry' (13:21) about Amnon and Tamar, but did nothing. He failed to punish Absalom. When Joab wanted to bring Absalom back he felt unable to resist. And when the battle began he ordered his commanders to 'deal gently' with Absalom even though he was guilty of treason. His feelings overcame his conscience, just as they had done in the case of Bathsheba.

There was another factor. David never forgot what he had done to Bathsheba and Uriah, or God's mercy to him afterwards. It is likely that he felt unworthy to execute justice since he had been guilty of similar things. That is a common problem when God's people are sensitive to their own sins.

It happens in families and in churches – the truth that 'we are all sinners' is made an excuse to neglect the discipline that Christ has given to his officers. And it is often fatal. It sounds like humility; in fact it is a disregard for God, just as serious as the ungodly attitude of Amnon and Absalom.

There are three obvious lessons here:

1. Past guilt must not hinder present duty
2. We must put principle above feelings.
3. Personal or family interests must not come before our service to Christ

## God's faithfulness

If we have witnessed similar situations we have probably said, 'Where is God in all this?' He was not in the thoughts of Amnon or Absalom. He was not in the advice given by Ahithophel. He did not prevent any of it from happening – rather he leaves us responsible for doing what is right (we are not robots). And he never speaks from beginning to end of the story.

The people of God have often felt that he has forsaken them. In Psalm 77 the writer asks, 'Has the Lord cast us off forever? Has he forgotten to be gracious?' Yet God is active throughout. The fact that his work is hidden means David gets no comfort from it. And we may find ourselves in a similar situation. Then we have to rely on what he has already said, knowing he will fulfil his promises.

Two words of God were at work in all of this. One was the promise that David would be king, and his descendants forever. The other was the warning that 'the sword shall not depart' from his household as a result of what he did to Uriah (2 Samuel 12:10). Both were being silently fulfilled.

Did God's silence during those troubles mean that he had abandoned David? Certainly not! Indeed, Nathan had told him, 'God has put away your sin' (2 Samuel 12:13). God may chastise his people (Hebrews 12); that does not mean he has taken his mercy away, rather it is a sign of his fatherly love.

We see God's activity in a number of ways. God stirs people up to help his saints, even those we least expect. Ittai from Gath came to support him even though he was a foreigner and only a short time in the country. The priests came bringing the ark of God – though David sent it back preferring, as has been said, 'God's favour to God's furniture'. Ziba, Shobi, and Barzillai all came with provisions for his journey – a great risk as it seemed likely he would be defeated.

Another glimpse of God's activity is when Absalom takes Hushai's advice against the better advice given by Ahithophel. 'The LORD had purposed to defeat the good advice of Ahithophel, to the intent that the LORD might bring disaster on Absalom' (2 Samuel 17:14). That is a comment by the historian; David could not have known that at the time.

In the battle that followed there was no action on David's part. It was all down to God's providence. Indeed, he had ordered that his son's life be spared, even though that would have left continuing instability. It was by chance that Absalom was trapped, followed by a chance encounter with a soldier who refused to harm him. Then it was Joab, David's commander, who understood the danger and dealt the fatal blow. David only waited helplessly.

Sometimes we must wait helplessly on God's timing. That was the case for his people in Old Testament times as they waited for the promised Christ. It is the same for the church today.

Across the world Christians are being slaughtered. Individual believers find themselves in situations they cannot control. Evil sometimes seems out of control. But behind the scenes God is at work. He will fulfil his promises. The Lamb is upon the throne. And his time will come.

Meanwhile the story gives us advice on how to live. We must ask for the Holy Spirit to bear his fruit in us lest we give way to the works of the flesh and reap what David reaped. If we have responsibilities we must fulfil them, and not allow our feelings to get the better of our conscience. We must not allow personal interests to come before our service of Christ. And we are entitled to look to God's promises and remember what he has done so we do not fall for Satan's lie that evil is 'normal'.