

Redemptive Failure | Fall and Rise of the House of David

Absalom, Absalom

Second Samuel 18.9-15, 31ff & 9.1-7

9.18.22

Now Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. For 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, so he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him kept going.¹⁰ When a certain man saw it, he told Joab and said, "Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak."¹¹ Then Joab said to the man who had told him, "Now behold, you saw him! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? And I would have given you ten pieces of silver and a belt."¹² The man said to Joab, "Even if I should receive a thousand pieces of silver in my hand, I would not put out my hand against the king's son; for in our hearing the king charged you and Abishai and Ittai, saying, 'Protect for me the young man Absalom!'¹³ "Otherwise, if I had dealt treacherously against his life (and there is nothing hidden from the king), then you yourself would have stood aloof."¹⁴ Then Joab said, "I will not waste time here with you." So he took three spears in his hand and thrust them through the heart of Absalom while he was yet alive in the midst of the oak.¹⁵ And ten young men who carried Joab's armor gathered around and struck Absalom and killed him.

³¹ *Behold, the Cushite arrived, and the Cushite said, "Let my lord the king receive good news, for the LORD has freed you this day from the hand of all those who rose up against you."³² Then the king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And the Cushite answered, "Let the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up against you for evil, be as that young man!"*

³³ *The king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And thus he said as he walked, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"*

Then it was told Joab, "Behold, the king is weeping and mourns for Absalom."² The victory that day was turned to mourning for all the people, for the people heard it said that day, "The king is grieved for his son."³ So the people went by stealth into the city that day, as people who are humiliated steal away when they flee in battle.⁴ The king covered his face and cried out 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, "Today you have covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who today have saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters, the lives of your wives, and the lives of your concubines,⁶ by loving those who hate you, and by hating those who love you. For you have shown today that princes and servants are nothing to you; for I know this day that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased.

For the last month or so, we've been analyzing the moral failings of an ancient Israelite ruler (1000 BC), the sins of King David. It might be good for US to ask how WE would feel if a group of people knew about and were inspecting OUR flaws... On the other hand, David and his life ARE a kind of gift to us from God to help us see ourselves a bit more clearly AND as a warning to us AND as one painful piece in a much larger Story.

A few weeks ago we looked at regret. Today we look at a subset of regret, namely GRIEF, our emotional response to loss and death.

How does the basic truth of Christianity, the Gospel, inspire a different approach to grief? Let's look at:

- 1) **A Context FOR Grief**
- 2) **A Concentration ON Grief**
- 3) **A Confidence IN Grief**

I'm not exaggerating when I say that this is one of the top three or four saddest moments in the entire Bible. The anguish experienced by the grieving father when he repeats the words, "*O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!*" - it's like the voice of Grief itself!

There's always a context for grief and I want to set the stage for this grief story (4 CHs!) by looking at three characters: the counsellors, the son and the father.

The rebellion has begun. The aging king has been informed that his genius prime minister has gone with Absalom. It's a major blow personally because Ahithophel was a very close friend to David but also a wonderful counselor... like the voice of God (16.23).

So, David sends another counselor, Hushai, to defect over to the son, Absalom's side... but Hushai will be a kind of double-agent. (This would make a great movie!) And Hushai is tasked by David with giving bad advice to Absalom... so David can get the upper hand.

Ahithophel (Bathsheba's grandfather) knows what to do: this is the moment of greatest momentum. It's time to strike NOW before David can muster an army.

Then Absalom gets a second opinion (fatal mistake!) and he looks to Hushai who offers a long, very eloquent speech (Ahithophel was very blunt/direct) and the double-agent, Hushai, uses all these ornate words and flattery. And Absalom is apparently so impressed by the presentation that he falls for the smooth words and takes the Hushai plan.

Ahithophel now realizes he's chosen the wrong side. "This kid has stars in his eyes and is NOT a wise or godly man... and this coup WILL fail." So Ahithophel saddled his donkey, puts his home in order and hangs himself – an omen of things to come.

Then there's David's nephew Joab; faithful to David all the way...except he's such a doer and so ruthlessly pragmatic... that sometimes he "knows better" than David and...you know... does what has to be done (even if David doesn't have the stomach for it!)

David asks General Joab to protect Absalom when the fighting starts... “whatever happens, make sure Absalom gets back home to me safe and sound!”

And Joab says, “Sure thing, Uncle Dave!” but as he walked away, Joab likely rolled his eyes and said, “Yeah...that’s not gonna happen...If I catch that scoundrel, Absalom... he’s dead!”

Then there’s ONE MORE counselor... as David and his small entourage flee Jerusalem down the Jericho Road to the Jordan Valley, this guy shows up to curse David. He walks alongside nonstop cursing David and throwing rocks at them because this guy was a Saul-supporter and claims David killed Saul (he didn’t). Joab and his brother want kill this screaming wild man but David says, *“Nope! I didn’t kill Saul but this madman is right – I AM a man of bloodshed... and I made my own bed! Maybe God is using this guy.”*

Then there’s the son. He started out wanting justice for his sister. When David was apathetic and didn’t bring his son, Amnon, to answer for his crimes – that’s when Absalom got angry...killed his brother (the rapist) and Absalom, the angry son, RAN...

Three years later he’s brought back to Jerusalem but not greeted by his father, “The King,” as David is a better king than a dad... Absalom got bitter. But he did look good... handsomest man in the realm and he has that fab-u-lous hair on his royal head, that sacred head.

And now... it’s ON! A full-blown rebellion, an effort to overthrow the passive king. But he took the wrong counsel...and now, as the Hebraist, Robert Alter wrote: “Having climbed from exile and rejection to the throne, he now dangles helplessly between sky and earth.” (*The David Story*, p. 305) Ahithophel rides a donkey and now hangs in his house and Absalom’s donkey kept going and now the prince hangs in an oak tree. Ahithophel gets an honorable burial; Absalom is thrown into a ditch and covered with stones.

The beautiful man, the favored son, head once crowned with splendor, riding a mule while his dad walked barefoot with his head covered in shame. The sacred head fit for a crown is now crowned with thorny branches and hangs from a tree – “Cursed is everyone who hangs from a tree.” (Deut 21.23; Gal 3.13).

Absalom the handsome and glorious prince is pierced by a mocker... surrounded by wolves (Ps 22); a rebel who comes to a bitter end... and gets what he deserves.

And yet (third character)... the father...David... is so shattered, so damaged. He can’t see a rebel... he only sees a boy, his beloved son: *“O my son, Absalom, Absalom, my son, MY SON...would that I had died instead of you. O Absalom... my son...my son.”*

David could kill giants and defend the flock from a lion and a bear, lead armies and rule a nation; such a strong man... and such a weak father...full of grief.

But even a weak father loves his son and now David isn't only grieving – he's GRIEF incarnate.

GRIEF, if I could concentrate on it for a moment (2nd point), grief is something we begin to learn about fairly early. Our goldfish dies and goes... "to the ocean"

We may move...relocate...and we grieve THAT. At some point we lose a grandparent...and then another and another. A parent and then another. Eventually a sibling. The older you are, the more acquainted with grief.

Grief can be cruel...because we get attached to things that get taken away... to places we leave behind and of course to people.

AND we're all going to die. One of us will be the next to go... we don't know who.

I have four siblings, very close, and one of us will grieve the other four, will endure that pain four times. In fact, someone in this room... who today is very young and knows NOTHING about loss and grief will live to see everyone else's death. That's a lot of grief.

Grief often walks hand-in-hand with regret. We ask questions like: What if we had tried this treatment or ...had gone to another hospital? Why didn't I spend more time with her while we had that time? We express regrets like, "I wish I'd been a better daughter...a better father." (Certainly, this was on David's mind as he howled in sorrow/anguish).

And if we are theists... believers in gods or God or even believers in fate (whatever that means) we find ourselves eventually moving past secondary causes like, "If only he'd exercised more or if she'd worn a seatbelt..." – we move to the Primary Cause – God.

If God could've stopped this accident but didn't – doesn't that make God somehow responsible for this loss? Was God, like David, passive? Or worse? Remember, Martha and Mary: "*Lord, if YOU had been here my brother would not have died!*" (John 11)

Some people linger on these questions for their whole lives and never get free from the power of grief and just stay low-level sad. AND at the other end... some people, some cultures (like our own!) try to sanitize grief and move on as quickly as possible. The word "funeral" seems to be on its way out and in its place, "A celebration of life" – I get it. It sounds nicer. I'm not judging you if you like that but I do wonder if it's not an unconscious attempt to deny death.

But whether we're denying death by avoiding grief... or stuck in grief/sorrow/regret...the advice we get from the social sciences is pretty much limited to grief-management.

This week I looked at an article from the American Psychological Association. At the end of the article the writer (Katherine Nordal) gave some action points: "Grieving individuals may find it helpful to use some of the following strategies to help them process and come to terms with loss: (5 points)

Talk about the death of your loved one with friends or colleagues...

Accept your feelings. You may experience a wide range of emotions from sadness, anger or even exhaustion. All of these feelings are normal...

Take care of yourself and your family. Eating healthy foods, exercising and getting plenty of sleep...

Reach out and help others dealing with the loss. Spending time with loved ones of the deceased can help everyone cope...

Remember and celebrate the lives of your loved ones. Anniversaries of a lost loved one can be a difficult time for friends and family, but it can also be a time for remembrance and honoring them."

Can you guess what I think of those measures? I think they're all great and I think we should practice them. I have tremendous respect for good psychologists and counselors. It must be unbelievably difficult to help people at this level full-time!

The Bible however tells a much bigger story and is interested in something way beyond grief strategies and management... or financial management or how to manage "work/life balance" or how to keep the fire burning in your marriage... David's sad story...is a part of the Big Story pointing to the One True King – not Absalom OR David or any of their advisors but a King who came to deal with the root of grief which is death and loss themselves.

David's story pictures another Son... the True Absalom ("My Father is Peace") who came to establish peace between two warring parties: the God who is holy, holy, holy and hates sin AND in the other corner, YOU... and I who are selfish and hostile to God – we all want to take His place (as Absalom wanted to dethrone David so EACH of us wants to dethrone God!)

As David became the incarnation of grief, David's descendent, Jesus Christ, was the Incarnation of Love, the incarnation of God... the God-Man.

Jesus Christ stepped into the fray. He made peace by becoming the Wonderful Counselor (infinitely better than Ahithophel or Joab). He spoke words of life (John 6.68). He lived truthfully and perfectly obeyed His Father. He loved God and people perfectly. He was obeying for ME – in order that I might be credited or rewarded for what HE DID.

He was the Fairest of all men in the realm – His Heart was only Truth, Beauty and Goodness.

His Sacred Head – once crowned with splendor, came down from the Throne Room...He, wasn't a usurper, didn't snatch or grab at (Phil 2.5-11) what was already His but emptied Himself for every one who simply trusts Him.

Jesus Christ's Sacred Head was wounded... crowned with thorns as He too hung between earth and heaven... and He was charged NOT with His own sedition and treason but with mine. He was cursed IN my place – *"Cursed is everyone who hangs from a tree."*

He was pierced by a mocker and according to Psalm 22 was surrounded by a pack of wild animals, wolves and bulls, men bent of killing Him... bent on killing God Himself. Absalom got what he deserved but Jesus Christ got what I deserved IN ORDER THAT I would have what He deserved.

He even rode a donkey to His death as Absalom had done but whereas Absalom's mule kept going, the unbroken donkey Jesus Christ rode didn't buck or bray or kick because it somehow realized that THIS was the one Human Being who could be totally trusted – THIS is the True King of Creation.

And because out of this worst moment in all of human history (the rejection of God by His own creation) because OUT of that unspeakable tragedy, God the Father Himself giving His Son... out of that came the death of death. Jesus Christ rose and death died... Because of that I can and must WEEP WITH THIS FALLEN WORLD. "Blessed are those who mourn for they WILL be comforted." (Mat 5.4) BUT I can't get lost in grief... St Paul wrote: *"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope."* (1 Thess. 4.13)

David is told by Joab, "C'mon, David! Get over it and man-up. Take the throne – the people are looking to you!" But David has to weep and I mean really weep – some of the saddest words ever spoken! And he will move on... BUT until his death, David remembered the tragedy of life in a fallen world... and lament, weeping was a part of David's spiritual practice and habits.

Grief is meant neither to be a ignored nor to be a master. We will grieve in this pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem... we know that even now we can mock death... "O death where is your sting?..." Jesus Christ has defeated death.

Bad stuff happens... some of our loved ones refuse that grace of God and are lost... There are mysteries we wish we could understand... But the Gospel empowers us to both weep (really weep) and to HOPE – we do not grieve as those without hope.

I love the closing lines of John Donne's "Sonnet #10" (1609)

***"One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die"***