

Absalom”

Someone has said, you can pull the nails out of a plank, but the scars remain. When we confess our sins to Jesus and turn from them, God forgives. But sometimes the scars remain. David, the illustrious king of ancient Israel discovered that. His adulterous affair with Bathsheba caused people to lose respect for him, and also set in motion a chain reaction of family trouble, including rape, murder, and civil war.

The book of 2 Samuel in the Old Testament vividly portrays one of David’s sons named Absalom. Absalom is young, and extremely good looking! “Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised so much for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him” (2 Samuel 14:25). Bright, charming, Absalom was a prince from head to toe! His father was King David, his mother was the daughter of a king named Talmai.

Absalom became famous for his beautiful long hair. He only cut it once a year, and when he did, he would weigh it (almost as if it were an important kind of ceremony). His outward, physical appearance drew “oohs” and “ahs”, but his inward emotional life was like a raging storm. As a boy growing up, he was given all the advantages of wealth and culture as the son of a king, but apparently he didn’t get what he needed most: *a father’s love*. King David was apparently so busy with the affairs of state that he never took time to really get to know his sons...and daughters.

Perhaps there is a word here for fathers (and mothers) today. I once saw a short film about a man who had a successful business. The time came when he wanted to hand it over to his son. But the son didn’t want it. He had seen that work – this business – had become the father’s whole life. And this dad gave his son everything except what he needed the most: *a dad*. They never really got to know each other. *Every child, deep down, needs a father. Every child, deep down, needs a mother. Take time to get to know your children.*

One of the things I cherish about my dad was that he took time for me. Some years he worked 2 jobs just to keep our family going, yet he found time to do things together with me. He coached Little League baseball teams, and a few years I played on his team. He coached one of the ice hockey teams I played on. We played church softball on the same team. We went fishing together. He was a pilot, and we spent many hours flying together.

It was the day when fathers were invited to their child’s preschool classroom. So this dad went to his son’s classroom. When he got there, he was surprised to see how few dads were there. Later that morning all the children were sitting around on the floor in a circle. The teacher asked the children to tell the group something about their fathers, something special. One little boy said “Well, my dad is a lawyer. He makes a lot of money and we live in a big house.” Another child said, “My daddy is very smart. He teaches at the college and a lot of important people know him.” Finally, it was time for this father’s son to say something special about his dad. The little boy looked up at his father, then looked around the circle of his friends, then he just smiled and said very proudly: “My dad...my dad is *here!*”

Many parents today are busy people. But what could be more important than spending quality time with our children? Doing things *they* want to do. Taking an interest in *their* lives?

King David, remembering his lustful affair with Bathsheba, could hardly provide the *loving discipline* his children needed. I hardly need to comment on the emotional damage that is done to children who discover that their father has been cheating on their mother, or their mother has been running around with another man!

Absalom, and another of David's sons, Amnon, are classic example of this. Amnon, taking a cue from his father's lust, becomes infatuated with his beautiful half-sister Tamar. He is so madly in love with her that he throws all restraint aside and rapes her, bringing disgrace on Israel and the royal family. His father David, feeling his own guilt, does *nothing* to reprimand the boy.

It's hard to expect our children to do right if parents don't model this in the home. A 15 year-old boy, from a fine home in an upper class neighborhood, was picked up by the police for car stripping. The youngster sat with his head down while his well-dressed parents bombarded him with questions: "Why'd you break the law?" "What ever got into you, Jim?" Finally, the boy raised his head defiantly and angrily said, "Well, what about all those souvenirs like towels and stuff you bring home from motels after a business trip, Dad! And how about the way you laugh to your friends about how you pad your expense account" The seeds of rebellion in kids are planted by the hypocrisy of adults and parents. Children pick up not so much what we *say*, but what we *do*.

Even though King David is furious at his son Amnon for violating his half-sister Tamar, he does nothing to punish him. Absalom too is outraged at what has happened to Tamar, since she is his full-blooded sister. For over 2 years Absalom nurses his hatred for Amnon, until finally he arranges a plot. He gets Amnon drunk, then assassinates him. Absalom then flees to his mother's people – to his grandfather Talmai, a king in Syria. While there, he keeps hoping that David, after a period of mourning, will welcome him back to Jerusalem, and recognize him as the son who is now heir to his throne. But 3 years pass, and nothing happens. The Bible says, "And the heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom, for he was now consoled over the death of Amnon" (2 Samuel 13:39). But David doesn't budge. Apparently, he has mixed feelings towards Absalom that tie him in knots.

Finally, his no nonsense general, Joab, urges him to let Absalom come back home. Absalom returns to Jerusalem, but David still shuts him out. David orders: "Let him go to his own house, he is not to come into my presence" (2 Samuel 14:24). They are in the same city, but don't see each other. This goes on for 2 years! So by now 5 years have separated David from his son Absalom. Absalom repeatedly tries to see his father. (Underneath, he longs for his father's love). Finally, they get together, but the meeting is stiff and formal.

Five years being snubbed and ignored by his father have angered and alienated Absalom. As a result, Absalom grows more and more critical of David. He's convinced more than ever that his father is to blame for the things that are wrong in the kingdom and that *he himself can fix them!*

His blood begins to run hot with the idea that he is somehow destined to become the new hero of the people to replace his aging, declining father. Like a clever politician he begins to play on people's emotions. The Bible says Absalom "stole the hearts of the people of Israel" (2 Samuel 15:6). Absalom becomes so vain and self-centered that he builds a mausoleum where he can be buried – sure that he will always be remembered and revered!

Gathering all the discontented people he can find, he puts together a rebel army. The conspiracy starts out strong! David has to flee Jerusalem. Absalom comes in and takes over the royal palace. And, in an act of utter defiance, the young rebel takes over the royal harem in public! "They pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof, and he slept with his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel" (2 Samuel 16:22). There is no turning back now!

But while Absalom romps with the harem girls, David plans counter moves. Though badly outnumbered, David and his royal troops have the advantage of being experienced in warfare. Even so, King David, realizing his rebellious son is in danger, tells his generals: "Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake" (2 Samuel 18:5).

Led by his seasoned general Joab, David's soldiers make their move. They corner Absalom and his inexperienced soldiers in the forest of Ephraim, so that the rebel troops become confused and separated. Sensing they are cornered and trapped in the forest, the rebel troops scatter in panic, every man for himself. Absalom takes off on a mule by himself. Galloping along, he meets a detachment of David's troops. Quickly, he turns in another direction, and apparently looking back to see if they are chasing him, he runs into 2 low hanging branches of a tree. His head is jarred violently, stuck in the V-shaped branches, while his mule keep on going!

There he is. Kicking, squirming, panic stricken. Trying to free himself and get his feet on the ground. Quickly David's soldiers surround him. But they don't dare lay a hand on him, *the king's son!* That is...until the steel cold general Joab is told what had happened, and arrives on the scene. Without hesitation, he throws 3 javelins into Absalom, badly wounding him. Then he orders 10 of his armor bearers to finish the job. Absalom is executed on the spot. Ironically, he is not buried in the magnificent tomb that he had built for himself. He's thrown into a big pit, and David's soldiers throw in stones to cover his body.

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, David waits anxiously for word about the battle. Finally, 2 messengers come and bring the news. Good news, they say! The pretender to the throne – the rebel – is dead! How does David take the news of his son's death? In one of the most moving, poignant verses in the Bible, it tells us: "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" (2 Samuel 18:33). David's grief is the sobbing of a parent who had lost his son long before he died in the Ephraim forest, for they had drifted further and further apart.

As in most family difficulties, everyone, not just one member of the family, contributes to the problem. Absalom, for example, played his part in the family breakdown. Too self-centered to

recognize his own limitations; too immature to temper his ambitions to healthy goals. But David failed as a father: too busy, too crippled by his own compromises in life to give his children the love and discipline and sense of security they needed.

William Barker, in his book *Saints and Swingers*, does a character sketch on Absalom, the Rebel. He says: “Every father should know that there are many ways to lose his son. And every son should know that there are many ways to lose a father” (and that goes for mothers too). “Relationships are so precarious, so fragile.”

Who of us, if we’re parents, have not felt at times that we have failed to be the parents we want to be, or wanted to be? And who of us as children have not at times felt that we have not done right by our parents?

But the cross of Jesus provides the means of healing for both the young rebel spirit, and the older broken spirit. For in the cross of Jesus we see that *everyone* (young *and* old, parents *or* children) are finite, sinful people, in need of forgiveness and divine help. And when both parents *and* children are willing to recognize our own need of God’s help and forgiveness, old wounds in families can be healed, and fresh starts can be made in family relationships.

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June 21, 2020

