

**Absalom – image over substance**

**II Samuel 13 to 18**

**Long ago and far away...**

**T**he Old Testament can seem like a strange place. This was a violent society and we must resist the temptation to judge these people by our standards – or to judge God by his actions 3000 years ago. God works with the raw material he can get whether it is a tenth century BC tribal warrior like David – who would not hesitate to kill to protect his people - or a twenty first century social worker who wouldn't stand on an insect if she could help it!

Nobody is perfect in this world and even the heroes have obvious flaws. Our story today exposes some of David's; his inability to control those close to him, especially his own children. And so in II Samuel 13 we meet Amnon, the king's son, who rapes his half-sister Tamar, the king's daughter. But the upholder of justice in Israel cannot punish his son, though David is angry with Amnon he does nothing. Imagine how you would feel if you were Tamar's brother.

Well, before long we meet her brother, a passionate young man called Absalom. When his father refused to act justly he determined that his half-brother would die. But Absalom could not get to Amnon straight away, so he nurtured a quiet loathing for two years before he achieved his goal. He was filled with hate, but it was the civilised sort of hate that simmers under the surface while pretending that everything is OK – so the first time we meet Absalom we see the kind of person who says one thing but is really thinking another – he became brilliant at it and he used this skill to great effect later in the story.

**The comeback kid**

**T**ime is a great healer – indeed it is, and David must have taken comfort in the fact that two years had passed and his family life went on as normal. For sure, Amnon and Absalom were not speaking to each other, but this is par for the course in family life – you just seat them at different tables at weddings and no-one gets upset. “Time is a great healer” – but not always. Absalom was nursing his hatred and waiting his moment.

**II Samuel 13:32-29**

David has to do something this time, so he sent his son into exile. Yet the king is soft on his children and cannot bear the separation (**13:38-39**). So Joab plotted to bring Absalom back. He succeeded but David would not have the murderer in his own home.

This was not enough for Absalom, who was determined to get back to court, he bullied Joab into fixing a meeting with David and he was eventually reconciled with

his father. Absalom had engineered his own comeback, but he had a much bigger goal – he wanted to be king - he was now in a position to mount his campaign. Israel did not hold elections, and you only got to be king by the consent of David – he would eventually name which one of his sons would be his successor. But Absalom knew that no king could rule without the consent of the people, he also knew that some Israelites bore a long-standing grudge against David. What followed was, in effect, an election campaign as Absalom set out to undermine the leadership of David and present himself as the obvious choice for the top job.

His methods are very familiar to anyone living in a modern democracy society, let's take a closer look:

First, he is already famous for his good looks (**14:25-26**). I sometimes wonder if we are aware how susceptible we are to the way people look.

Second, without actually saying that David doesn't care about people's problems, he goes out of his way subtly to undermine the existing leadership (**15:1-6**). Central to this tactic was a synthetic interest in people and their affairs (**15:3-4**).

Finally, he made sure that people knew he wasn't the kind of guy who would stand on ceremony (**15:5-6**) everyone would go home and tell all their friends what a humble young man Absalom was.

All the while he is using the skills he has honed throughout his adult life – seeming to be one thing whilst really being another. Behind the generous smile is a heart full of darkness, behind the false humility is a passionate desire to be boss, behind that handsome face is a very ugly purpose. Yet he has Israel eating out of his hand (**15:6**).

This is a good time to pause and reflect on what we can learn.

Clever people can use humility to get what they want.

Good looking people have an easier job persuading us to follow them than nerdy types!

Wicked people can be good at manipulating their image when what lies beneath can be pretty terrifying. Joab was a danger because he was only interested in himself. Absalom was ten times more dangerous – he was only interested in himself but seemed to be passionately concerned with others.

We know all this, we have seen our fair share of self interest in our own leaders, twenty-first century people are pretty cynical when it comes to leaders. But cynicism is not a Christian option – we are called to be wise rather than cynical. How do you tell the Absaloms from the genuine article?

Jesus would tell us to look on the heart and not on the outward appearance, sounds mystical, doesn't it! Actually it is not – if you want to see what is in someone's heart look at what they do over time, look at the actual fruit of their lives – that will give you a pretty good idea of where their heart lies.

In the Christian community, that means taking a good look at a person's private life. These are the qualifications for first-century church leadership:

### **I Timothy 3:1-7**

Contrast this with a list of characteristics given in a recent book on America's Fortune 500 pastors, destined for greatness, these are their qualities:

*“Winsome, charismatic, executive-like pastors who exude warmth and success. Known more for their humour than for their spirituality; today's market-sensitive pastors are relationally savvy...instead of eliciting deep feelings of guilt, as the old revivalists did, these pastors lift the spirit, promote optimism and make people feel good about themselves.”<sup>1</sup>*

It is not wrong to exude warmth or to preach encouraging sermons, but the underpinning for authentic Christian ministry is authentic Christian character. You do not judge character by someone's hairstyle or choice of suit, or by their ability to create an image for themselves. You look at their heart by looking carefully at the fruit of their lives.

### **King Absalom**

**W**e need to try to be fair to Absalom. He was probably convinced that there was something wrong with David's rule of Israel. He was right, and he had personal experience of David's inconsistent justice. He felt that he could do better if he were king (**15:3-4**) so he set out to topple David.

### **II Samuel 15:7-18**

He had prepared for four years (he was good at this remember, he knew how to hide his feelings and wait his moment before acting to achieve his aims) and then he acted with masterful decisiveness. Absalom's swiftness of action put David on the back foot and within a few hours the killer of Goliath, the pacifier of the Philistine menace is on the run, leaving Jerusalem to avoid a pitched battle in its streets. The Bible takes a couple of chapters to describe one of the saddest sights in Israel's history; David and those loyal to him filing out of the city. But then something small but significant happens, we are going to pause and think about it:

### **II Samuel 15:19-22**

Now and then as you read the Old Testament you are presented with an event that, though true and significant in itself, makes you think of something bigger and more significant. As though the Holy Spirit were sketching something out for us on the back of an envelope to help us see something important; a little diagram to help us get the point. There is one here, a little sketch of what it looks like to be a Christian.

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<sup>1</sup> *Selling Jesus: what's wrong with marketing the church*, Douglas Webster, quoted in Dale Ralph Davis, *ibid* page 152

Ittai shouldn't really be there, he is a Gittite – a foreigner who owes no national loyalty to the King of Israel (**15:19-20**) – David wanted to avoid his having to his life on the run. But Ittai won't stay behind, he insists on going into exile with David, *“Wherever my Lord the King may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be”*.

Back in the days of communist Europe, before the iron curtain came down, I visited some Christians in East Germany. I met a sixteen year old girl who wanted to be a nursery nurse but they would not give her a job because she was a Christian, I met a sixty year old professor of engineering but he was sacked for the same reason – he had a living shovelling coal into the boiler of an industrial central heating system. Why didn't they just stop being followers of Jesus so that they could do what they wanted?

I guess that every Christian who ever faced pressure or persecution had the same decision to make – you don't have to be there, you can walk away, but you don't. Why don't you? Because he is the king and you are his servant and that is how it is.

This is what it looks like to be a real Christian – nothing will separate you from the Lord, you will go where he leads you and you will accept the consequences of that no matter what they are.

So Ittai gives us a baseline - this is what a good heart looks like; this is how the good guys behave. We need the reminder because we are about to see the opposite.

## **II Samuel 16:15-23**

This is an astonishing public display of contempt for David. One by one, in front of everyone, the old king's concubines are led into the tent carefully placed on a very visible rooftop. Everyone knows what is happening inside that tent - now that Absalom is king, he is letting David know how it feels when someone close to you is raped.

Anyway, the rest is pretty straightforward. Absalom attacks David in the open and gets himself killed. What could possibly be uplifting about a story like this?

### **The God who keeps his promise**

**M**any years before, God made a promise to David. Here it is:

## **II Samuel 7:8-16**

Imagine you are Tamar – your life is in pieces and you ask yourself, “Is this just random, or is there a plan?”

Imagine you are Ittai – you are losing everything and asking yourself, “Is this just random or is there a plan? There was a plan.

Imagine you are one of David’s concubines – you are about to publicly lose your reputation and you ask yourself, “Is this just random, or is there a plan?”

There is a plan.

History is heading for a goal, God will send the Christ into the world, he will be a son of David, he will offer his life for the sins of the world (yes, people like Amnon and Absalom and you and I), he will come again and judge the world, and he will restore all things to their pristine glory. The earth will – one day – be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. He is determined to bring this about.

In January 1899, the *Forrest Hall*, a three masted ship with eighteen people on board, foundered off the coast of North Devon. The same storm which had driven them onto the rocks prevented the men of Lynmouth from launching their lifeboat. The weather was appalling, but these men were determined to rescue the crew of the *Forrest Hall*.

Jack Crocombe, the lifeboat’s coxswain proposed to take the boat by road to the more sheltered harbour of Porlock, *13 miles around the coast*, and launch it from there.

The boat plus its carriage weighed about 10 tons, that morning 20 horses and 100 men started by hauling the boat up the 1 in 4 Hill out of Lynmouth. 6 of the men were sent ahead with picks and shovels to widen the road. At the top of this hill the boat had to be hauled over Exmoor; they hauled their boat to a height of 1423 feet above sea level then over 15 miles of moorland, finally they had to descend Porlock Hill with horses and men pulling ropes to stall the descent. The men of Lynmouth launched their lifeboat in Porlock at six-thirty in the morning.

They were cold, soaking wet, hungry and exhausted, and they rowed for over an hour in treacherous seas to reach the stricken *Forest Hall*. All the men were rescued and taken safely back to harbour.

This is the kind of God we worship; nothing will stop him carrying through his plan of salvation – neither the power-hungry Joabs in our national life, or the preening Absaloms on our TV screens. Somehow, God will even use the unpromising material we have in our churches to bring his plan to a conclusion – nothing and no-one will stop this happening.

Trust Him, there is a plan.