

The Weight of the Crown

The Absalom Conspiracy

2 Samuel 15-16

Mark Vroegop

After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him. And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate. And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, "From what city are you?" And when he said, "Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel," Absalom would say to him, "See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you." Then Absalom would say, "Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice." And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him. Thus Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel. And at the end of four years Absalom said to the king, "Please let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed to the LORD, in Hebron. For your servant vowed a vow while I lived at Geshur in Aram, saying, 'If the LORD will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will offer worship to the LORD.' " The king said to him, "Go in peace." So he arose and went to Hebron. But Absalom sent secret messengers throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, "As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then say, 'Absalom is king at Hebron!' " With Absalom went two hundred men from Jerusalem who were invited guests, and they went in their innocence and knew nothing. And while Absalom was offering the sacrifices, he sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counselor, from his city Giloh. And the conspiracy grew strong, and the people with Absalom kept increasing (2 Sam. 15:1-12, ESV).

One of the many reasons that we love the Psalms is because of the way that they capture the real world in a way that is emotionally realistic. We run to Psalms not only because they are comforting, but also because they put into words what we experience. In that way, they are incredibly helpful, comforting, and instructive.

Psalm 55 is a good example of this:

My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated his covenant. His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords (Ps. 55:20-21).

Perhaps you know what this is like. We might use words like "betrayal," "stabbed in the back," a "coup," "treason," or "double-crossed." These words describe a situation where someone close to you ends up becoming a painful adversary or foe. In the case of David, it was his own son, Absalom. If you fast forward to the New Testament, we find it in the life of Jesus with Judas.

Betrayal is a uniquely painful experience. Sadly, it's rather common. Second Samuel 15-16 helps us to see the contours of this conspiracy for the purpose of seeing the hand of God in David's life. Once again, I remind you that this book is not about David or Absalom; it's about God, his glory, and our need for a better king and kingdom.

Until Jesus returns, betrayal will always be a part of the world in which we live. Yet, it's helpful to examine these chapters to see what lessons we can learn and how it makes us long for our true King.

One Question

The main point of this sermon is related to an application question that I'd like you consider with me:

What grace is needed for the betrayer and the betrayed?

If we think of God's grace as what he can supply to help us, then I'd like for you keep this question in mind as we make our way through the text. What does Absalom need from God? What does David need from God?

And I'll tell you, straight up, why I'm setting up this sermon this way. It's because we need to use both Absalom and David as mirrors for reflection.

Betrayer

Chapter 15 begins with "After this Absalom" (v. 1). It has been a few weeks since we were last in 2 Samuel. Let me remind you about the context. In chapter 13, we learned about the sexual assault of Tamar, a sister to Absalom. It is baffling and outrageous that David did nothing to Amnon, the man who raped Tamar. As a result, Absalom took matters into his own hands.

He lured Amnon away from Jerusalem under the guise of a sheepshearing party and had him killed. Absalom fled the country. Eventually he was brought back to Jerusalem, but he was not given an audience with King David for two years (14:28). Absalom tried to use Joab as a mediator, but Joab wouldn't respond. In order to get Joab's attention, Absalom ordered his servants to set fire to Joab's neighboring field. Well, it worked. Joab appealed to King David, and he and Absalom were reunited:

So he came to the king and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom (2 Sam. 14:33).

That's the "after this . . ." at the beginning of chapter 15. It's a lot. Take note of the grievance and the hurt that Absalom was dealing with. He was probably deeply frustrated with his father for not doing more to care for Tamar, and he'd not have been wrong on that account. David's lack of leadership and care for Tamar are inexcusable. But there's something more that's going on here with Absalom. We get a sense that he was hurt or bitter from the years he spent in exile, along with the stiff arm he received from David after he returned to Jerusalem.

Absalom will eventually lead a rebellion. He'll betray his own father. But you need to see that it starts with a wound, being slighted, and bitterness. No one aspires to betrayal and leading a rebellion against

your own father. It starts with a bitterness that grows, that takes on a life of its own. Rather than embracing grace, they embrace their grievance. So, Christian, be careful with your hurt, bitterness, and grievances. They can open a dangerous door. Address even your right sense of injustice correctly and biblically. Watch out for a grievance that grows.

Absalom's next step was to lay the framework for his popularity and power to grow. Look at what he does:

- Created an image of success and power by securing a chariot and fifty men to run before him (v. 1)
- Positioned himself to be accessible to the people by rising early and standing by the gate (v. 2)
- Warmly greeted the people as they come to the king when disputes need to be settled (v. 3)
- Expressed uninformed empathy with people about the basis of their claims (v. 3)

Take note of this one. Dale Davis writes, "Absalom never met a plaintiff with whom he didn't agree."¹ While empathy is really important, keep in mind that manipulative people can use empathy to lure you into their cause. The facts didn't matter. It only mattered if the person had a grievance.

- Highlighted the unfairness of the situation (v. 3)
- Suggested that he could solve the problem if only he were given power to judge (v. 4)
- Connected with the people with affection (v. 5)

It's a very familiar playbook. And none of it is terribly wrong if taken individually. You could imagine Absalom saying, "Hey, I'm just being friendly and greeting people. I'm concerned about how upset they are, and no one is listening to them. I have ideas about how to solve these issues, but not one listens to me either. Is anyone complaining about me? They seem to appreciate my concern for them."

Well, it worked. Here's the summary from the narrator: "Thus Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment. So, Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel" (v. 6). The word for "steal" here means to dupe the mind and deceive people.² People loved Absalom, but they didn't know what his real motives were all about.

This went on for four years until Absalom feigned a spiritual purpose for a journey to Hebron. This was the historic city of Abraham and where David began his reign as king (v. 7). It's hard to question someone's motives when they are citing spiritual reasons for their actions. Absalom used this reason as a cover for his covert plan to overthrow his father. Verse 10 tells us that he sent messengers to each of the tribes to announce that he is king at Hebron.

Absalom invites two hundred people from Jerusalem to this event in Hebron, where he offers sacrifices that are part of his coronation as king (v. 11). He also sends for one of David's advisors, Ahithophel (v.

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, [*2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*](#), Focus on the Bible Commentary (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 188.

² Dale Ralph Davis, [*2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*](#), Focus on the Bible Commentary (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 189.

12). And the narrator concludes with this summary and warning, “And the conspiracy grew strong and the people with Absalom kept increasing.”

The stage is now set for a major crisis. Absalom has deceived the people, won their hearts, and he’ll soon march on Jerusalem.

The rise of the betrayer is a warning because the “grievance as identity” is one that I’m sure we’re all familiar with. What’s more, it’s easy to get swept into the mix. Instead of living on grace, we can easily find ourselves frustrated, angry, and able to be manipulated by Absalom-like people. Be careful. A few years later, you might find yourself saying, “What was I thinking?” Absalom is a betrayer.

The Betrayed

Imagine David hearing these words in 15:13, “The hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom.” His own son revolted against him. David, no doubt, remembered the words of Nathan, “{God} will raise up evil against you out of your own house” (12:11) after his sin with Bathsheba. This tragedy must have landed on him with both a sense of regret and deep pain.

Even though Absalom was in Hebron, David decided that the palace needed to be evacuated (v. 14). All of the palace staff were organized, and they made preparations to flee the city (v. 17). A procession of sorts took place as all the servants passed before the king. David called out a man named Ittai who only joined the palace the previous day, and he urged him to go back (vv. 19-20). But Ittai refused.

But Ittai answered the king, “As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king shall be, whether for death or for life, there also will your servant be” (2 Sam. 15:21).

Dale Davis calls Ittai “an island of fidelity in a sea of treachery.”³ The result was great weeping as the king left Jerusalem for the wilderness (v. 23). But it wasn’t just the palace staff who were leaving, the priests fled as well with the ark of the covenant. However, David instructed Zadok the priest to bring the ark back to Jerusalem. His words are important:

Then the king said to Zadok, “Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me back and let me see both it and his dwelling place. But if he says, ‘I have no pleasure in you,’ behold, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him.” (2 Sam. 15:25-26).

Take note of two things: (1) In this dark moment of personal betrayal, David did not use the ark of the covenant for his personal or political advantage. He’d learned the lesson from the history of Israel. 2) David was resting his deliverance on the grace of God. Remember that this kind of situation was what Nathan told him would happen. David was probably filled with regret, and yet he trusted in God’s grace.

³ Dale Ralph Davis, [*2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*](#), Focus on the Bible Commentary (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 192.

According to verse 30, David ascended the Mount of Olives “weeping, barefoot, and with his head covered.” In other words, he was mourning. Adding to his pain, he learned that his trusted advisor, Ahithophel, had joined Absalom. Yet notice his prayer in 15:31, “O Lord, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness.”

As you probably know, things get complicated and layered in situations like this, and we see this with David. In verses 32-37, a friend of David’s named Hushai joined him as he left, and David sent him back to the palace with the hope that he could have influence. But he also desired for Hushai to keep him informed of what was happening.

In chapter 16 we read about a conversation between Ziba and David. Ziba brought provisions for the king and the fleeing servants. You may remember the name Ziba because he is the steward in charge of Mephibosheth’s estate. He presented himself as loyal to the king, and David granted him the rights to the estate again. He formerly was the owner of it. But in chapter 19 we’ll learn that Mephibosheth was deceived by Ziba. This entire conversation was a manipulative ploy to gain favor with David. It’s remarkable how selfish people can be and how they’ll use someone else’s painful moment for their own advantage.

After David crossed the Mount of Olives, he came to the city of Bahurim. A prominent man who was related to Saul named Shimei met David’s entourage, and he began to curse David and threw rocks at him. Here’s what he said:

And Shimei said as he cursed, “Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless man! The LORD has avenged on you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned, and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood” (2 Sam. 16:7-8).

One of David’s soldiers, Abishai, was outraged by Shimei’s conduct. He offered to cut off his head (v. 9). But David’s response is instructive despite how tempting it would be to allow Abishai to take this action.

But the king said, “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the LORD has said to him, ‘Curse David,’ who then shall say, ‘Why have you done so?’ ” And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, “Behold, my own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite! Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. It may be that the LORD will look on the wrong done to me, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing today” (2 Sam. 16:10-12).

What a perspective! And this is not the only place we see this. Listen to Psalm 3, which was written during this moment of David’s life:

A PSALM OF DAVID, WHEN HE FLED FROM ABSALOM HIS SON. O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, “There is no salvation for him in God.” Selah But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the LORD, and he answered me from his holy hill. Selah I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD

sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around. Arise, O LORD! Save me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to the LORD; your blessing be on your people! Selah (Psalm 3).

While David kept trusting, Shimei kept cursing. What's more, Absalom entered Jerusalem and took the throne of Israel. Based on the advice of his counselors, he pitched a tent on the roof of the palace and slept with the palace concubines "in the sight of all Israel" (v. 22).

What kind of grace does the betrayer and the betrayed need? Two passages to consider:

Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Eph. 4:26-32).

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:21-23).

Let's guard our hearts from grievances. Let's embrace the grace of entrusting ourselves to the one who judges justly.

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