

The Absalom Rebellion

Of all the narratives in the Old Testament, one of the most striking stories is that of Absalom's rebellion against his father David, told in the second half of 2 Samuel (Chapters 15 to 20). Almost every detail in this event has theological significance. But what about the story as a whole? Does it have meaning for us today? Or is it just another interesting story – of which there are very many – that we can ignore if we so please? We have gone thru 1st and 2nd Samuel, verse-by-verse in Sunday School in years past. So we needn't repeat that exposition here. But let's look at a few parts of the story because they add up to a powerful lesson for us today.

In brief, the rebellion is a judgment upon David yet a demonstration of God's love for David, both at the same time. The first part of David's life is told glowingly. David was elect by God, received God's special covenant, was protected and used powerfully by God to create a nation, and was a blessing to the people of Israel. He had an intimate personal relationship with God, and God loved him deeply. But because of his double sin, committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband, God's punishment fell on him with terrible ferocity. Sin has consequences; God sees to it that that happens. Because David's sin involved the destruction of a family, David's family was the target of God's judgment. David lost his sons one by one, lost his concubines, lost his rulership and was forced into exile, almost lost his life, and lost his ability to think clearly as a king ought. Yet, God remained faithful to Him and restored him, out of love and because God had very great purposes to fulfill through David's line.

Although a son, Absalom was not like David at all. He was proud (even narcissistic), uninterested in God, and wanted to rule as king even if it meant killing his own father to do it. God could not allow Absalom to be king over Israel. Besides, God had already declared that Solomon was to succeed David as king over Israel, not Absalom. Yet, the threat to David was real. Absalom had carefully arranged a coup that might have been successful if it weren't for God's unseen control over the episode. My readers ought to take the time to read these chapters, because it is thrilling to see how God acted to fulfill His will in the lives of people unaware of God's control.

Let me digress briefly to illustrate how the Spirit, the ultimate Author of Scripture, embeds wonderful theology into the text as well as controlling the flow of history. In 15:16-22 we find a precious analogy of the Church. Ittai the Gittite left Jerusalem along with David, although he didn't need to. He was a Gentile. David told him to go back, but Ittai said "No." In language reminiscent of Ruth's love for Naomi, Ittai said that he would go with David wherever David went even if it would cost him his life, and he swore this on oath to God. Ittai is a type of Gentiles in the future coming to the Jewish King/Messiah, Jesus, to follow Him and to serve Him. Don't miss this: While David was bearing the consequences of the sins of his family, while David was rejected by his own people, certain Gentiles – Gentiles! – embraced him in love and loyalty. This was Genesis 12:3 being fulfilled in miniature, anticipating the greater fulfillment that will come during the Church age and more so in the future Kingdom. Jesus is a greater David, One who fulfills the blessings that David partly fulfilled.

Back to our story. As David took what was not his to have (a replay of the disobedience in the Garden), so Absalom tried to take what was not his to have. He rebelled against God as well as against his father. In fact, according to the Mosaic Law, which the kings were given to Israel to uphold, Absalom deserved to be put to death. He murdered his brother (a replay of the Cain and Abel narrative), he had sexual relations with his father's concubines, and he was a rebellious son. He was a usurper. Like Satan. He used the power of cunning and swords to achieve his ends, unlike David who in humility and submission to God was given power by God. Running throughout this narrative is the great question, a meta-theme of all Scripture: Who has the right to rule? Does Satan have the right? No, only Jesus, the ultimate son of David, has the right to rule. Why? Because Jesus out of love sacrifices himself for his subjects and humbly exercises the power that God grants him to rule according to God's will. Absalom had no right to rule.

Notice how Absalom dies. His body was thrown into a pit and covered with stones. No proper burial. It reminds us of the Korah rebellion in Numbers 16. In other words, the Absalom rebellion is a reprise of what Korah did,

rebelling against God's elect, Moses, and the earth swallowed him up. And Absalom's body covered with stones reminds us of the Law that says that a rebellious son should be stoned to death. God's will was carried out. This whole sordid episode in 2 Samuel is a reprise of the Golden Calf episode in Exodus, and it adumbrates the future rebellion against God's authority that will culminate in exile, and worse, it is proleptic of the rejection of God's ultimate elect Ruler, the incarnate Son. Absalom didn't merely rebel against David, he rebelled against God, who had chosen David to rule. Absalom embodied Satan's wickedness.

We mustn't miss God's interventions to control the outcome. Just three examples here: (1) God clearly influenced Absalom to accept the (sabotaging) advice of Hushai instead of what would have been the correct advice in that situation of Ahithophel. (2) God saw to it that Absalom's gorgeous hair, which probably contributed to his conceit, got caught in the branches of a tree and suspended him helplessly in mid-air. Worse, hanging from a tree placed Absalom under the dreadful curse of the Law. He had to die. And (3) God provided David with the competent and wise Joab who, by the wise advice to David mourning the loss of his son, probably saved the kingdom.

The meaning of this narrative to us is exceedingly serious. Absalom's rebellion means this, Don't rebel! I suspect that we don't really understand rebellion. Rebellion is the deliberate exertion of one's own will to defy or hurt another whose will we are obliged to obey. It is more than disloyalty. It is more than unfaithfulness. It is the intentional, willful setting aside of what is rightfully owed to another in order to gratify oneself. It is rejecting the will of God in order to satisfy self. All sin is rebellion. All disobedience of God's revealed will is rebellion.

God allows us a measure of moral freedom by which to exert our will. The temptation to sin is, we think we're in control and have the freedom to do as we please. Like Absalom, we sin because we can. What needs to grip us is, rebellion against a good, holy and wise God, our Creator and Sustainer, is not only stupid, it justly deserves consequences, i.e., judgment. In any matter or issue where God has given us His will, to refuse to fulfill it is a slap in the face of a holy God. This needs to rouse us from our indifference to His Word. Because God has revealed His will, we're under strict obligation to know it and to obey it. We dare not try to excuse ourselves with notions of grace or forgiveness or love or freedom or whatever. Absalom experienced God's wrath for rebellion in this life. God may also visit us with judgments in this life, such as sickness, calamity or other tragedy. Or He may wait until the next existence, when it's too late to repent. If we're wise, we'll be exceedingly careful to study His Word and obey it. The lesson of this narrative we mustn't miss is, God is dangerous.

Absalom wanted to rule. We too want to rule – our own lives. We can't and we mustn't try. We're creatures, and God knows best how we're to live the life He created and gave us. He alone has the right to rule us. So let's be humble and submit to God's will for us. We can do it out of fear, or better out of love and gratitude. But obey God we must.

The Church today in America is infected with antinomianism. We're not even aware of it, we're so indifferent to God's will and His purposes. Antinomianism is rebellion against our Father in heaven. We are like little, modern Absaloms. We have lots of information about the Bible, thanks to great teaching and preaching in our evangelical churches. But we have no or scant intention to obey the Word. May God have mercy on us.

This may be a good place to clarify a huge and serious misunderstanding that has gripped Christianity today. And with this, I conclude. We're not saved by believing certain information about Christ. Yes, we must know that truth that's revealed in Scripture. But, and this is exceedingly important, information and holding to correct doctrines doesn't save. Knowing what the Gospel is doesn't save. We're saved by being in a trusting, loving personal relationship with the living Christ. And if we love Jesus and if we trust Him, we'll obey Him.