

Sermon 50: 2 Samuel 18:1-19:8: Judgement on Absalom

OUTLINE

Absalom's deserved judgement
David's selfish grieving
Joab's necessary counsel

INTRODUCTION

Love made a god becomes a demon. This is a paraphrase of a point C S Lewis makes in his book *The Four Loves*. When we love something too much, when we make a god of it, we turn it into a terrorising demon in our lives. Central to the books of 1 and 2 Samuel is the notion of God sovereignly causing His will to come to pass, the same is true of 2 Samuel 18:1-19:8 as we see God judging Absalom. But there is always a side story as we have documented the sins or obedience of the others involved. In our portion today we witness David, the man credited with being a man after God's own heart, being self-absorbed and a man after his own heart. David is absorbed with a selfish love for his son. Perhaps to your mind, the words selfish love are mutually exclusive and there can be no such thing. But it is not true. Our sinful hearts are able to make love a selfish thing and David does in this chapter.

Civil war has broken out between those loyal to David and the huge army Absalom has amassed to kill David. As David addresses his forces he says, 'Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom,' v5. Absalom is a traitor who deserves to die, and yet David loves his son so blindly, that he asks for gentleness for Absalom. Absalom will die, as a fulfilment of God's purposes. And when the good news is told David, it is bad news and he turns victory into defeat by his selfish grieving. Joab has to come in and be a 'dutch uncle' who tells David the hard truth. So as we go through this chapter I want you to think about your love, and the love you have for your families, your dreams, and I want you to evaluate whether like David those things are an idol in your lives. Remember how we identify idols in our lives. When an idol is removed, does it make us mad, sad, bad or glad. Angry at God and others, so sad we fall into depression or suicide, we sin in order to have it, or as a punishment upon God because it has been taken away, or it is something that we have made necessary for our ultimate happiness. Or another way of identifying an idol is when something in your life apart from God is necessary for your identity, purpose, satisfaction or security. We will look at this chapter in three parts, firstly, Absalom's deserved judgement, David's selfish grieving and Joab's necessary counsel.

Absalom's necessary judgement

The opening section v1-8 gives us the detail about the preparation before the battle and the battle itself. One significant difference worth noting which contributes to how things worked out is that Absalom led his own forces exposing himself for attack, while David's men kept him out of the battle. You will remember that Hushai appealing to Absalom's pride warned him off a quick strike with a smaller force by tempting him with the glory of leading a bigger army that would crush David. It is this very plot which will eventuate in Absalom being killed.

The detail of the battle is minimal because it is not the focus, it is summed up in verses 6-8, 'So the army went out into the field against Israel, and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. 7 And the men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the loss

there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. 8 The battle spread over the face of all the country, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword.'

Verses 9-15 deal with the death of Absalom. The portion is remarkably full of poetic irony as Absalom is judged and killed. We see Absalom riding on a mule, the mount of a king through the forest but his mount forsakes him as he is left hanging in a tree. Tradition has it that Absalom was hanging by his hair, this was one of those assets emphasized in his good looks when he was winning the hearts of the people. It is now the means of his death. The fact that Absalom is hanging from a tree was a common sign for judgement, one Christ fulfilled by hanging on a tree taking the curse for us. Gal. 3:13, 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us---for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."' If we were to show Christ in this text, it is here as the criminal dies that we must emphasize how Christ is in this text. Christ became a curse for our sins where Absalom died for his own. Which way will we have it, will we attempt to bear the curse ourselves or will we accept Christ as the one who bore it on our account? Because judgement day is according to works, we have no hope apart from Christ taking our punishment, or else we will become like Absalom and bear it ourselves. We also see that he is buried not in the ground but on it under a pile of stones, v17. This was a common way of burying criminals, such as Achan, Josh. 7:26. In 18:18 Absalom's reign is summed up as being sonless. He had children, but it appears that all his sons must have died. In OT terms when fertility and children living were signs of God's blessing this seals the feeling of being under judgement.

Joab is a curious character in this section. He does the right thing but in the wrong way. We are not told that he was honouring God, but we do see him fulfilling God's will. Was it political expedience that led him to remove Absalom, was it personal revenge because Joab was responsible for reintroducing Joab to court life? Or was it personally motivated because Absalom if he ever did become king would no doubt remember who resisted him in this rebellion.

David's selfish grieving

The detail of the text goes on to note how Joab tried to strategize to manage how to deliver the good but bad news to David. Joab knew that David would not take the news well, and perhaps feared that he would kill the messenger as he had done with those bringing news of the death of Saul and Ishbosheth. Ahimaaz volunteers, but Joab instead sends a Cushite. Ahimaaz still insists he wants to go, what are his motives? We are not told, perhaps he hopes to be the bearer of good news and gain a promotion, or perhaps he feels invested in the victory since he and his brother were messengers in the delivering of Hushai's message to David. Ahimaaz takes the longer but easier route and arrives first. We are transported to the scene of David watching the horizon waiting for sign of good news, v24. We see that David pins much hope on Ahimaaz being a good man and coming with good news. There may be the note of talking himself up for it.

Now it is important to note that the word for reporting good news is found 30 times in the OT, and 9 of those 30 are in our section. Listen to the good news, 'All is well' v28. And, 'Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my Lord the king,' v28. Is this good news? God is our God, He has acted against the enemies of His kingdom, He has given a great victory and punished His enemies. This is very good news, if you are kingdom minded, but notice David's response, 'Is it well with the young man Absalom?' v29. You can imagine Ahimaaz trying to keep the smile on his face,

and when he realises that David cares more about the life of Absalom than those of his men, he chickens out of telling David the bad news.

Then the Cushite arrives, v31-33, ' And behold, the Cushite came, and the Cushite said, "Good news for my lord the king! For the LORD has delivered you this day from the hand of all who rose up against you." 32 The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And the Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man." 33 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!"

Should David be grieving? Of course he should, he is a father, and Absalom was his son whom he loved. Can we sin in our grief? Yes we can and it appears that David did. David's love for Absalom was inordinate, and so his grieving went in wrong directions. There can be no doubt that David's grief is driven by guilt. This would not have happened if he had not sinned with Bathsheba. This resulted in the unreasonable demand that David's men show gentleness to Absalom. Absalom had come to kill David, David was on the opposite of refusing to kill Absalom. David was asking his men to further risk their lives in keeping a criminal alive. He was failing as king and as a good military leader. He was blinded by his love for Absalom which was fuelled by guilt. The total self-absorption in retreating to his room instead of greeting his victorious men who had ended a civil war, rescued his life and brought stability to Israel. We are told that the people came back arriving as if they were ashamed and had done a wrong. David's responsibility as king, his responsibility to his men, David's view of God bringing judgement on those who destabilise His kingdom is all ignored as David digs deeper into his pity party.

This happens to all of us. Think of the parent who grieves the death of his son because his dreams for his son will now never be realised, and he feels robbed. This is a love infected with self-interest. Woven into the real love felt is this note of self-interest which if fanned into flame highjacks the mourning process. It is not processed in light of God's sovereignty and purposes but only in light of our losses. In David's situation God's kingdom had won a great turn, but he was only measuring the losses he has incurred. When we lose something in our lives, like David, how are we evaluating its loss? Is it guilt that compounds your self-pity, is it anger because your wishes and dreams are frustrated? David's dream of a family reunion or Absalom succeeding him on the throne are taken, but God's kingdom is advanced, God's enemies are judged.

Joab's necessary counsel

When we are not seeing clearly we need a dutch uncle to come and give us the truth we need to hear. Firstly, Joab puts David's selfishness into perspective, v5-6, 'Then Joab came into the house to the king and said, "You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who have this day saved your life and the lives of your sons and your daughters and the lives of your wives and your concubines, 6 because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you. For you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you, for today I know that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased.' No doubt these would be hard words to hear. David did not intend to convey ingratitude or that he values the life of his reprobate son over the whole of his army and other family members, but this is what his self-pity is communicating to those who have risked everything for him.

Secondly, Joab gave David an action plan, v7, 'Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants, for I swear by the LORD, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night, and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now.'" Joab impresses the importance of addressing the matter immediately and counsels him to go out and acknowledge the victory.

Is there a challenge for you in this text. At times we will be those after God's heart, but at others we will be like David who is self-absorbed, self-pitying, and cannot see the good God is doing, or the good others are doing for him.