2 Samuel 13:1-19

When Our Sin Comes Home

Now Absalom, David's son, had a beautiful sister, whose name was Tamar. And after a time Amnon, David's son, loved her. And Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend, whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David's brother. And Jonadab was a very crafty man. And he said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed and pretend to be ill. And when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me bread to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. And when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand."

Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house and prepare food for him." So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. And she took dough and kneaded it and made cakes in his sight and baked the cakes. And she took the pan and emptied it out before him, but he refused to eat. And Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, that I may eat from your hand." And Tamar took the cakes she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister." She answered him, "No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this outrageous thing. As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the outrageous fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you." But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her.

Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, "Get up! Go!" But she said to him, "No, my brother, for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me." But he would not listen to her. He called the young man who served him and said, "Put this woman out of my presence and bolt the door after her." Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves, for thus were the virgin daughters of the king dressed. So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore. And she laid her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went.– 2 Samuel 13:1-19 ESV

This chapter will expose yet another ugly consequence of David's disobedience to God's commands. He had been forgiven by God for his sins, but that did not mean he would suffer no consequences. In this case, we begin to see one of the unexpected consequences of David's

violation of God's command not to marry multiple wives. Three of David's children are involved in this story. Two of them, Absalom and Tamar, were born to David by his wife, Maacah. Absalom was born while David reigned in Hebron. Tamar was most likely born after David moved his capital to Jerusalem. Amnon was born in Hebron as well, but to a different mother, Ahinoam. David had many wives and even more children. Like any family, there would be sibling rivalries and conflicts. But his hyper-blended family was going to prove to be a breeding ground for trouble. As this story unfolds, one of the things that will stand out David's less-than-stellar parenting skills. He may have been a mighty warrior and military leader, but he appears to lack what it takes to lead his children. His neglect of his parental responsibilities will only grow worse and more deadly as the sordid details of the events become known to him.

We're told that Amnon "loved" his half-sister, Tamar. She was young, beautiful, and a virgin. While the text claims that love was involved, it is interesting to note that the Hebrew word used to describe Amnon's affection for Tamar can refer to *sexual attraction*. As the story graphically demonstrates, Amnon's attraction to his half-sister was purely physical. He lusted after her. So much so that he made himself sick thinking about it. Amnon knew Tamar was off-limits, and he racked his brain trying to figure out how he might have her, even as he was having immoral and inappropriate thoughts about her. With the advice of a close friend, Amnon devised a plot to carry out his lust-driven desire to have Tamar, and David unknowingly went along with it. He was oblivious to what was going on. So, he sent Tamar to take food to her "sick" brother, not knowing what Amnon had planned for her. Amnon, driven by lust and fueled by his physical passions, ended up raping his sister against her will and despite her impassioned pleas to stop.

Tamar begged Amnon to consider what he was doing. She pleaded, "Don't be foolish! Don't do this to me! Such wicked things aren't done in Israel. Where could I go in my shame? And you would be called one of the greatest fools in Israel. Please, just speak to the king about it, and he will let you marry me" (2 Samuel 13:12-13 NLT).

It would not have been unprecedented for David to agree to a marriage between the two of them. It was a common practice in those days. Abraham married his half-sister, Sarah (Genesis 20:12). But Amnon was not interested in marriage, and he was unmoved by Tamar's warnings about the damage this act would do to his reputation. He could care less. He was driven by lust, and we know the deadly outcome of a life motivated by this insatiable, self-centered work of the flesh.

> *…each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*
> – James 1:14-15 ESV

Once Amnon got what he wanted, his "love" for Tamar turned to hatred. Having satisfied his sexual desire, he had no more need for her. His physical passions satiated, he threw her out like a used, unneeded object. He took her virginity by force and left her to deal with the shame, dishonor, and humiliation all alone. She was thrown out by force, discarded like so much trash, used up, and no longer of any value to Amnon. As a sign of mourning over her lost virginity,

Tamar tore her robe and covered her head in ashes. In that culture, she would be considered damaged goods. It did not matter that she was the king's daughter. She was no longer a virgin and would be treated with disdain and viewed with disrespect, regardless of the circumstances. No man would want her. Her young life had been ruined, all because Amnon could not or would not contain his lust. He was a man driven by sexual desire. His lust had overshadowed any love he had for Tamar. He had long ago stopped seeing her as his sister or even as a woman. She was an object, a trophy to be won and a forbidden desire to be satisfied, at any cost.

But this will not be the end of the story. It will get worse. As James so pointedly puts it: “and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” The most telling part of the story will be the role David plays. What will he do when he finds out what happened? How will he handle this devastating event that took place in his home between two of his children? David was the king, but he was also a father and a husband. How would he lead? He knew how to fight the enemies of Israel and win, but did he know how to do battle with the enemy within the walls of his own home? David was going to learn that inaction and avoidance would be inadequate reactions to what had happened. While doing nothing was the easier path to take, it would prove disastrous and deadly in the end.

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2 Samuel 13:20-33

Turning A Blind Eye to Sin

And her brother Absalom said to her, "Has Amnon your brother been with you? Now hold your peace, my sister. He is your brother; do not take this to heart." So Tamar lived, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house. When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry. But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad, for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had violated his sister Tamar.

After two full years Absalom had sheepshearers at Baal-hazor, which is near Ephraim, and Absalom invited all the king's sons. And Absalom came to the king and said, "Behold, your servant has sheepshearers. Please let the king and his servants go with your servant." But the king said to Absalom, "No, my son, let us not all go, lest we be burdensome to you." He pressed him, but he would not go but gave him his blessing. Then Absalom said, "If not, please let my brother Amnon go with us." And the king said to him, "Why should he go with you?" But Absalom pressed him until he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him. Then Absalom commanded his servants, "Mark when Amnon's heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, 'Strike Amnon,' then kill him. Do not fear; have I not commanded you? Be courageous and be valiant." So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded. Then all the king's sons arose, and each mounted his mule and fled.

While they were on the way, news came to David, "Absalom has struck down all the king's sons, and not one of them is left." Then the king arose and tore his garments and lay on the earth. And all his servants who were standing by tore their garments. But Jonadab the son of Shimeah, David's brother, said, "Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men, the king's sons, for Amnon alone is dead. For by the command of Absalom this has been determined from the day he violated his sister Tamar. Now therefore let not my lord the king so take it to heart as to suppose that all the king's sons are dead, for Amnon alone is dead." – 2 Samuel 13:20-33 ESV

God had given instructions regarding incest:

> *If a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people. He has uncovered his sister's nakedness, and he shall bear his iniquity.* – Leviticus 20:17 ESV

The only thing unclear to us is the meaning of the phrase "cut off." The Hebrew word has a wide range of meanings and can refer to everything from excommunication from the assembly to actual execution. But there is little doubt that God expected action to be taken in the case of incest. Yet, as we read the story of Amnon's rape of his half-sister, Tamar, there is no action taken by David, who was Amnon's father and king. Perhaps David was reluctant to deal with Amnon because his it was all a painful reminder of his own sin with Bathsheba. He too, had

taken what was not his to have. It could also be the case that, as the eldest son, Amnon was considered the heir to David's throne. But regardless of David's reason or rationale, he was wrong for failing to deal with the situation more forcefully.

The first place Tamar went after her humiliation by Amnon was to her brother Absalom's house. It is concerning that she did not go to her father. Was this because she believed David would show her no sympathy? Did she doubt that her own father would avenge the loss of her virginity to her brother? We can only conjecture, but it does raise questions regarding David's relationships with his children. The only emotion David displays during this whole sordid affair is anger. But his anger never took the form of action. Two years would pass before anything happened to Amnon for his grossly immoral act, and David would play no part in it. David's silence and inaction allowed Amnon to go unpunished and Tamar to go unavenged. His decision to turn a blind eye to Amnon's sin would lead to another unexpected and unnecessary tragedy within his household.

Little did David know that Absalom, the blood brother of Tamar, had been planning and plotting his revenge. He hated Amnon for what he had done to Tamar. And, as will become clear later, Absalom held a grudge against David for not having punished Amnon for his transgression. He lost respect for David as a father and as a king. The man who ruled the nation could not even manage the affairs of his own household. And, in time, Absalom's disdain for his father would turn into a desire to seize his throne.

But Absalom, tired of waiting for his father to do the right thing, took matters into his own hands and plotted Amnon's death. It was a well-crafted plan that used deception, just as Amnon had done to rape Tamar. Absalom lied to David to get him to send all his sons to join Absalom at Baal-hazor. Absalom's servants would be shearing his sheep and he was going to treat his brothers to a feast in celebration of a bountiful harvest of wool. Initially, Absalom had invited David to come, but it seemed that he knew his father would decline the offer because of his pressing duties as the king. David was a little surprised that Absalom invited Amnon to the festivities. He was aware of the animosity between the two half-brothers, but this didn't prevent him from giving his permission for the feast to take place. Under pressure from Absalom, David agreed and sent all his sons to Baal-hazor, a decision he would soon regret.

Absalom commanded his servants, "Wait until Amnon gets drunk; then at my signal, kill him! Don't be afraid. I'm the one who has given the command. Take courage and do it!" (2 Samuel 13:28 NLT). These instructions should sound vaguely familiar. When David wanted to get rid of Uriah so he could marry Bathsheba, he gave Joab similar instructions.

> *"Station Uriah on the front lines where the battle is fiercest. Then pull back so that he will be killed."* – 2 Samuel 11:15 NLT

Then when the deed was done, he followed up with a second message to Joab: "'Well, tell Joab not to be discouraged,' David said. 'The sword devours this one today and that one tomorrow! Fight harder next time, and conquer the city!'" (2 Samuel 11:25 NLT).

Like his father, Absalom chose to get someone else to do his dirty work for him. He would not bloody his hands, but he was more than willing to take the responsibility for Amnon's death. Both men show a flippancy and disturbing disregard for what they had done.

In all the confusion after Amnon's death, David received a report that wrongly informed him that all of his sons had been killed. His immediate reaction was to tear his clothes and fall on the ground in grief. But once again, he took no action. It was Jonadab, David's nephew, who informed him of what really happened.

> *"No, don't believe that all the king's sons have been killed! It was only Amnon! Absalom has been plotting this ever since Amnon raped his sister Tamar."* – 2 Samuel 13:32 NLT

Jonadab had a reason to rat on Absalom. He was Amnon's friend and the one who had given him the bright idea how to lure Tamar into his room so he could rape her. He most likely feared for his own life, believing that Absalom might come after him next. But once again, David does nothing to hold Absalom accountable for his actions. The very next verse reveals that Absalom got away, not only with the murder of his brother, but with his life.

When the prophet Nathan had been confronted David for his sin with Bathsheba, one of the things he said to him was, "Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife" (2 Samuel 12:10 ESV). This statement could be taken as a prophecy regarding the wars that David would fight during his reign. His heirs would have the same problem. Yet, we know that Solomon ruled during a time of great peace and prosperity. So, it is likely that Nathan's reference to the sword and David's house has to do with the battles that would take place within his own family. This would not be the last death of a member of David's family. In time, David would receive news that Absalom had been put to death. At the end of Solomon's reign, the kingdom would end up divided and the kings of Judah, David's heirs to his throne, would spend years fighting with one another. There would be assassinations, deception, palace intrigue, and a revolving door of kings. So, David's sin and God's punishment for that sin was going to have long-term implications both in David's household and within his royal house.

What would have happened had David dealt with Amnon's rape of Tamar? How could things have turned out differently had David stepped up and done what was right? Now, his heir to the throne was dead and another son was in exile. David made no attempt to bring Absalom back and face the consequences for his crime. David's inaction would lead to further trouble in his household and within his kingdom. Sin, left unattended and unconfessed is dangerous in the life of a believer. But it is just as dangerous to ignore sin within the family of God. We may choose to tolerate it or sweep it under the carpet, but sin always has consequences. David was a father and a king. He had responsibilities to his family and his people. He answered to God for the health and well-being of both. And God is not one to tolerate sin or take it lightly. Amnon paid for his sin. Eventually, so would Absalom. But what might have happened had David done what he was supposed to do?

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2 Samuel 13:34-39

Getting Away with Murder

But Absalom fled. And the young man who kept the watch lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, many people were coming from the road behind him by the side of the mountain. And Jonadab said to the king, "Behold, the king's sons have come; as your servant said, so it has come about." And as soon as he had finished speaking, behold, the king's sons came and lifted up their voice and wept. And the king also and all his servants wept very bitterly.

But Absalom fled and went to Talmai the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son day after day. So Absalom fled and went to Geshur, and was there three years. And the spirit of the king longed to go out to Absalom, because he was comforted about Amnon, since he was dead. – 2 Samuel 13:34-39 ESV

Two times in this passage, we read the words, "but Absalom fled." He got away. He had arranged for and accomplished the murder of his half-brother Amnon and, literally, got away with it. He killed the rightful heir to the throne and lived to tell about it. No troops were sent to pursue him. In fact, no action was taken to bring him to justice. David mourned after him but sent no trips to arrest and return him for trial. Interestingly, the mention of David mourning for his son day after day is a reference to Absalom, not Amnon. David had already lost Amnon and would never get him back. But his loss of Absalom was even more painful because he was still alive.

David knew he had a responsibility to enact justice and hold his own son accountable for his actions. If he brought him back, he would have to die for his murder of Amnon. By leaving Absalom in exile, David was extending the life of his son. But for David, Absalom was as good as dead. So, he mourned and he wept, day after day. He had lost two sons as a result of one tragic incident.

But the saddest part is that David could have prevented any of this from happening. If he had dealt with Amnon's rape of Tamar, and done what he was required to do by law, Absalom would not have been forced to seek revenge. In the long run, David's passive parenting style caused untold pain. His refusal to deal with Amnon and discipline him appropriately left Absalom frustrated by the lack of justice. His younger sister had been raped and humiliated, but nothing had been done to the one who had committed this heinous act.

The text tells us that Absalom remained in exile for three years, and throughout that time, David's heart went out to him. He missed Absalom. He longed to see him. But he knew if he brought Absalom back, he would have to punish him for what he had done. So, David did nothing. As a parent, he let his son get away with murder. Yet, in the book of Deuteronomy, God gives very clear guidelines regarding justice.

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> *You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not pervert justice.* ***You shall not show partiality****, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you.* – Deuteronomy 16:18-20 ESV

No perverting of justice. No partiality in terms of its application. By refusing to pursue and punish Absalom, David was breaking both aspects of God's command. David was not operating out of ignorance. He knew the commands of God and understood his own role as the judge of Israel. The Book of Deuteronomy goes on to explain how the king of Israel was to familiarize himself with all of God's law.

> *And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them,* ***that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers****, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.* – Deuteronomy 17:18-20 ESV

David knew what God required, but refused to do it. He had conveniently ignored God's command because it conflicted with his own sense of fairness. He couldn't bring himself to mete out justice to his son. When Nathan confronted David about his sin with Bathsheba, he told a story about a rich man abusing and taking advantage of a poor man. David had no problem showing righteous indignation and demanding justice when it involved someone else's transgression. But when it involved his own son, David remained silent.

The law of God was clear concerning murder. Again, the Book of Deuteronomy provides explicit instructions on how to deal with those who commit murder.

> *But if anyone hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and attacks him and strikes him fatally so that he dies, and he flees into one of these cities, then the elders of his city shall send and take him from there, and hand him over to the avenger of blood, so that he may die. Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, so that it may be well with you.* – Deuteronomy 19:11-13 ESV

No refuge. No pity. No special treatment, even if the guilty party was the king's son. David was obligated by God to purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel. But he refused to do so, for three years.

In his letter to the Galatian believers, Paul gave a warning against sowing to the flesh. In other words, giving in to what our sinful nature wants us to do.

> *Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption…* – Galatians 6:7-8 ESV

In sinning with Bathsheba, David had sowed to his own flesh. He had given in to his base desires and committed an unlawful act. Then he had followed it up by having Bathsheba's husband murdered to cover up his actions. God forgave David for his sins, but that did not mean David would suffer no consequences. The infant son born to Bathsheba as a result of his adulterous affair with her died. And, as a result of his sin, David was informed that the sword would not depart from his house. There would be trouble and conflict within his own home, not just his kingdom.

Then Amnon raped Tamar, which led to Absalom killing Amnon. Now Absalom was living in exile, guilty of murder, and deserving of death. And through it all, David did nothing. He remained silent and inactive. He was the king and final arbiter of justice for the kingdom, but he refused to do his job. And his inaction would reap the whirlwind. Things would get worse before they got better. David could ignore the will of God, but could not escape the justice of God. He could refuse to do what God had called him to do, but God would ensure that His justice was not perverted. God will not be mocked. Yet, all of us have attempted to get away with murder, not literally, but figuratively. We think we can sin, seek forgiveness, and then escape any repercussions for our sins. We wrongly bel can simply ignore our sins and still enjoy God's blessings. We know what He would have us do, but we choose our will over His, then wonder why things don't turn out as expected. God will not be mocked, by the king, or anyone else. Passivity to sin is always dangerous. It is a cancer that spreads, ultimately bringing death and destruction. To ignore it is to invite further pain and suffering into our lives. What we reap, we will always sow.

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2 Samuel 14:1-17

God Takes Sin Seriously.

Now Joab the son of Zeruiah knew that the king's heart went out to Absalom. And Joab sent to Tekoa and brought from there a wise woman and said to her, "Pretend to be a mourner and put on mourning garments. Do not anoint yourself with oil, but behave like a woman who has been mourning many days for the dead. [3] Go to the king and speak thus to him." So Joab put the words in her mouth.

When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and paid homage and said, "Save me, O king." And the king said to her, "What is your trouble?" She answered, "Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead. And your servant had two sons, and they quarreled with one another in the field. There was no one to separate them, and one struck the other and killed him. And now the whole clan has risen against your servant, and they say, 'Give up the man who struck his brother, that we may put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed.' And so they would destroy the heir also. Thus they would quench my coal that is left and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth."

Then the king said to the woman, "Go to your house, and I will give orders concerning you." And the woman of Tekoa said to the king, "On me be the guilt, my lord the king, and on my father's house; let the king and his throne be guiltless." The king said, "If anyone says anything to you, bring him to me, and he shall never touch you again." Then she said, "Please let the king invoke the Lord your God, that the avenger of blood kill no more, and my son be not destroyed." He said, "As the Lord lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground."

Then the woman said, "Please let your servant speak a word to my lord the king." He said, "Speak." And the woman said, "Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God? For in giving this decision the king convicts himself, inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again. We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. But God will not take away life, and he devises means so that the banished one will not remain an outcast. Now I have come to say this to my lord the king because the people have made me afraid, and your servant thought, 'I will speak to the king; it may be that the king will perform the request of his servant. For the king will hear and deliver his servant from the hand of the man who would destroy me and my son together from the heritage of God.' And your servant thought, 'The word of my lord the king will set me at rest,' for my lord the king is like the angel of God to discern good and evil. The Lord your God be with you!" – 2 Samuel 14:1-17 ESV

More than three years have passed since Absalom arranged and carried out the murder of his half-brother, Amnon, as revenge for raping his sister, Tamar. Absalom fled Jerusalem, knowing he was guilty and deserving of death. He lived in exile in the land of Geshur the entire time and, while David thought about him every day, he did nothing to deliver justice for what his son had done. This whole sordid affair would have been well known to the people of Israel. It would

have been common knowledge that one of the king's sons had raped his half-sister and had then been murdered by her brother. They would have been aware of Absalom's exile and the rumor mills would have been busy with all kinds of gossip and speculation.

That's when Joab, the king's friend and military commander decided to take action. He determined that it would be in the best interest of the kingdom for David to allow Absalom to return. We are not told why Joab felt compelled to do this. There is no indication that any of his efforts had the blessing of God. Nowhere in the passage do we hear of him seeking or receiving a word from God. This would appear to have been his own idea and the fruit it would eventually produce seems to bear evidence that it was not within God's will.

When Joab saw how much David longed for Absalom, he concocted a plan to convince David to forgive and forget. Perhaps remembering how Nathan the prophet had used a story to trick David into confessing his sin with Bathsheba, Joab came up with a similar strategy. He hired a woman to tell a completely fabricated story to David that entailed the murder of her son by his brother. Her clansmen wanted to put the second son to death for having murdered his brother, but she described herself to David as a widow with no other sons to protect or provide for her. The living son was her last hope. If he were put to death, she would be helpless and hopeless. Her story, while somewhat similar to that of Absalom and Amnon, had some glaring differences. Absalom's murder of Amnon had not been in the heat of an argument and the result of uncontrolled passion. In other words, it was not a case of unpremeditated murder; he had planned it for over two years. His murder of Amnon had been calculated and carefully orchestrated. And the execution of Absalom for the murder of his brother would not have left David destitute and alone. He was the king. And technically, despite what Joab said, Absalom was not the heir to the throne. Amnon would have been, but he had been killed. Next in line would have been Chileab, David's second-born son (2 Samuel 3:3). Little did Joab know that God had already made a determination to make Solomon the next king of Israel. But Joab did what he thought was best. He believed that by getting David to allow Absalom to return, things would get back to normal in the kingdom. The king would stop grieving and the get back to the business of ruling his people.

But the thing we must remember when reading this story is that God had already given His will concerning matters of this nature. The Book of Numbers contains God's divine provision for those who commit murder by accident. God established six cities of refuge, designed as places where the guilty could go for safety until their case could be judged appropriately. But God had made it clear that acts of premeditated murder were not covered.

> *But if someone strikes and kills another person with a piece of iron, it is murder, and the murderer must be executed. Or if someone with a stone in his hand strikes and kills another person, it is murder, and the murderer must be put to death. Or if someone strikes and kills another person with a wooden object, it is murder, and the murderer must be put to death. The victim's nearest relative is responsible for putting the murderer to death. When they meet, the avenger must put the murderer to death. So if someone hates another person and pushes him or throws a dangerous object at him and*

> *he dies, it is murder. Or if someone hates another person and hits him with a fist and he dies, it is murder. In such cases, the avenger must put the murderer to death when they meet.* – Numbers 35:16-21 NLT

Absalom deserved death, but Joab was determined to get the king to grant him a pardon. Joab wasn't interested in justice, he simply wanted to remove the distraction so that David would get back to being king. And his reasoning, passed on to David by the woman, would be that this would be best for the kingdom. He even suggests that it would be what God would want.

> *"Certainly we must die, and are like water spilled on the ground that cannot be gathered up again. But God does not take away life; instead he devises ways for the banished to be restored."* – 2 Samuel 14:14 NET

In the carefully crafted speech that Joab had given to her, the woman appeals to God's mercy and love. She emphasizes His forgiveness. However, in doing so, she paints a one-dimensional view of God, conveniently leaving out His justice and holiness. God cannot overlook or turn a blind eye to the sins of men. It is contrary to His nature as God to pardon sins without delivering justice. There would come a day when God provided permanent forgiveness for all sins, but it would come at the cost of His own Son's life. Payment had to be made. The author of Hebrews reminds us, "For without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22 NLT).

Joab wanted everything back to normal. He was willing to overlook the sins of Absalom if it would restore David to his old self. This whole scenario was the brainchild of Joab, and was intended to get David to overlook the guilt of his son and allow him to return home with no justice being served. David, seemingly susceptible to a good story, gave in to the woman's tale and her plea to allow Absalom to be restored. This decision, like so many made by David, would come back to haunt him. He did not seek God's will in the matter, but instead, went with his gut. It seems that the woman, armed with the words of Joab, knew exactly how to get to David's heart. He longed for Absalom and was just looking for an excuse to bring him home. He didn't want to mete out justice, which is why he had left Absalom living in the land of his maternal grandfather for three years. Now, David seemed to have a viable reason for doing what he had wanted to do all along, absolve Absalom of guilt.

But God had not forgotten what Absalom had done. And contrary to the wise woman's words, God *does* take away life. He had taken the life of David's newborn son because of David's sin with Bathsheba. God had taken the life of Achan and his entire family for bringing sin into the camp (Joshua 7). God is a just and holy god. He is righteous and always does what is right. David could forgive and forget Absalom's sin, but God could not and would not.

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2 Samuel 14:18-24

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Then the king answered the woman, "Do not hide from me anything I ask you." And the woman said, "Let my lord the king speak." The king said, "Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?" The woman answered and said, "As surely as you live, my lord the king, one cannot turn to the right hand or to the left from anything that my lord the king has said. It was your servant Joab who commanded me; it was he who put all these words in the mouth of your servant. In order to change the course of things your servant Joab did this. But my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth."

Then the king said to Joab, "Behold now, I grant this; go, bring back the young man Absalom." And Joab fell on his face to the ground and paid homage and blessed the king. And Joab said, "Today your servant knows that I have found favor in your sight, my lord the king, in that the king has granted the request of his servant." So Joab arose and went to Geshur and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. And the king said, "Let him dwell apart in his own house; he is not to come into my presence." So Absalom lived apart in his own house and did not come into the king's presence. – 2 Samuel 14:18-24 ESV

Back in verse 2, we're told that Joab had sent for a "wise" woman, and now we see just how wise she really was. The Hebrew word the author used is *chakam* and it can refer to someone who is crafty, shrewd, or wily. While Joab had given this woman the story she told to David, her craftiness shows up in how she handled the situation once David saw through her little ploy. She was adept at thinking on her feet. So, once David guessed that it had all been the handiwork of Joab, she wisely responded, "Nobody can hide anything from you…" (2 Samuel 14:19 NLT). Most likely fearing David's anger at having been tricked, she buttered him up by telling him, "you are as wise as an angel of God, and you understand everything that happens among us!" (2 Samuel 14:20 NLT). This woman was shrewd, and we can see why Joab picked her for the job. She was perfect for the task and knew just how to handle David.

But one of the most interesting things she said to David required no deceit or flattery. She simply told him the truth. "In order to **change the course of things** your servant Joab did this" (2 Samuel 14:20a ESV). This statement carries significant weight, and its full import will not be apparent until the story unfolds. Joab had instigated this whole affair to get David to allow Absalom to return from exile in Geshur. He wanted things restored to the way they were before. He thought that his little plan would force a family reunion between David and his son, putting an end to David's mourning and restoring a sense of normality to the kingdom. But what seems to be missing in all of this is God's will. What did He want? Had any of this been His desire? Had he given Joab instructions to orchestrate this little attempt to deceive the king? Yes, God is ultimately in control and nothing happens without His knowledge, but that does not mean God approves of all that happens. The Bible tells us, "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps" (Proverbs 16:9 ESV). "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand" (Proverbs 19:21 ESV).

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Joab had been out to "change the course of things," but he would discover that the Lord's purpose would prevail, despite his plans and expectations. God had his own plans for Absalom, and if David would not do what was just and right, God would. When David agreed to Joab's plan and gave his permission for Absalom to return, things did not improve. David instructed Joab, "Let him dwell apart in his own house; he is not to come into my presence" (2 Samuel 14:24 ESV). In other words, David allowed Absalom to come home, but then placed him under house arrest. He refused to see his own son. The happy family reunion Joab had expected never took place. The prodigal returned, but not to the open arms of his father. Once again, David took the path of least resistance. He brought his son back, but he neither punished or pardoned him for his crime of murder. Perhaps David thought he had done Absalom a favor by allowing him to return. But David knew the law of God and his God-given responsibility as the sovereign king of Israel. David was well aware that his God demanded that justice be done. His son was guilty of murder and deserved to die. But David could not bring himself to condemn his son to death. So, he did nothing.

The Book of James provides a sobering reminder of the seriousness of David's inaction. "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (James 4:4 ESV). David knew what he had to do, but he simply refused to do it. It was as if, as long as Absalom was out of sight, he was out of David's mind. He didn't have to think about doing God's will. When Absalom had been in Geshur, David had an excuse for doing nothing. His son was under the protection of another king (the father of Absalom's mother). But now that Absalom was home, David kept him hidden from view so he wouldn't have to think about him. David was committing a sin of omission. He knew the right thing to do, but he chose to do nothing. And in doing so, he sinned against God.

We can ignore sin or attempt to turn a blind eye to it, but it doesn't go away. We can refuse to deal with the sin in our life or within the body of Christ, but the danger remains. In allowing Absalom to return, David allowed a cancer into his kingdom. He didn't know it yet, but David was about to get a powerful and painful lesson on what happens when a child of God fails to do what God has called him to do. Yes, God is gracious, merciful, and forgiving, but He is also just and righteous. Absalom had murdered his brother, and God's law demanded that justice be done. Absalom deserved death, and as God's king, David was obligated to carry out divine justice. Refusing to do so was just another sin, further complicating an already disastrous situation. David could attempt to turn a blind eye to Absalom's sin, but God couldn't. His justice would not allow it. David would learn that ignoring sin never makes it go away. Refusing to deal with it only aggravates it. Failure to confront sin in our life, or that of a brother or sister in Christ, *is* sin.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul addressed a serious problem that had arisen. There was a man in their church who was having an ongoing affair with his own stepmother. Instead of dealing with this blatant case of immorality, the church gave its hearty approval. So, Paul was forced to warn them of the danger of their action (or inaction).

> *Don't you realize that this sin is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old "yeast" by removing this wicked person from among you. Then you will be like a fresh batch of dough made without yeast, which is what you really are.* – 1 Corinthians 5:6-7 NLT

Passivity toward sin creates a vulnerability toward committing further sin. Sin is infectious, it never remains static. David could sequester Absalom away, out of sight and out of mind, but the sin of Absalom was going to spread and have a deadly influence on David's kingdom.

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2 Samuel 14:25-33

Good Looks and Bad Motives

Now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. And when he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king's weight. There were born to Absalom three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar. She was a beautiful woman.

So Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem, without coming into the king's presence. Then Absalom sent for Joab, to send him to the king, but Joab would not come to him. And he sent a second time, but Joab would not come. Then he said to his servants, "See, Joab's field is next to mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire." So Absalom's servants set the field on fire. Then Joab arose and went to Absalom at his house and said to him, "Why have your servants set my field on fire?" Absalom answered Joab, "Behold, I sent word to you, 'Come here, that I may send you to the king, to ask, "Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still." Now therefore let me go into the presence of the king, and if there is guilt in me, let him put me to death.'" Then Joab went to the king and told him, and he summoned Absalom. So he came to the king and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom. – 2 Samuel 14:25-33 ESV

David had agreed to Absalom's return to Jerusalem, but had essentially placed him under house arrest and refused to see him. After a three-year absence from the kingdom, Absalom found himself persona non grata, ignored by his own father, and left to wonder why he had agreed to come home at all. He would wait two full years, because David continued to practice a parenting style of inaction. There would be no punishment or pardon for the wrong committed. All the waiting gave Absalom time to grow in his resentment for his father. He most likely recalled David's unwillingness to take action against Amnon for raping his sister. David had done nothing. Two years later, Absalom grew frustrated by David's lack of decisive action, took matters into his own hands and murdered Amnon. This led to his three-year exile. Now, he was home, but another two years passed and he once again witnessed his father's refusal to deal with uncomfortable situations. Whatever respect he once held for his father was gone. He viewed David as a man of weakness, plagued by indecisiveness.

Centuries later, the apostle Paul wrote:

> *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.* – Ephesians 6:4 NLT

David could have used this simple, yet profound advice. The Greek word Paul used is *parorgizō* and it is translated "provoke to anger." But it can also mean "to exasperate." To provoke

someone to anger sounds like it refers to a deliberate attempt to purposefully annoy or to arouse anger in another individual. That most certainly can be true in many cases. But we can also create anger in another human being by doing nothing. We can frustrate them by our lack of initiative or general apathy. David was provoking Absalom to anger and resentment because of his lack of leadership and decisiveness. He was slowly beginning to view David as weak and incapable of leading boldly. Because Absalom viewed his father as incompetent to lead his own family, he would soon reach the conclusion that he was unqualified to lead the nation of Israel.

Absalom's growing anger and frustration is evident in how he handled Joab's refusal to answer his requests for an audience with the king. Like his boss, Joab did nothing. In time, Absalom great impatient and snapped, taking matters into his own hands and commanding his servants to set fire to Joab's barley crops. That got his attention. You can see Absalom's growing exasperation with the whole situation. He had waited two years and simply wanted something to be done. He even told Joab, "I wanted you to ask the king why he brought me back from Geshur if he didn't intend to see me. I might as well have stayed there. Let me see the king; if he finds me guilty of anything, then let him kill me" (2 Samuel 14:32 NLT).

Absalom would rather face death than have to live in limbo, confined to his home. But there is almost an underlying sense that Absalom knew David would do nothing. He seems to know that his father would never sentence him to death for his murder of Amnon. So, he was willing to force David's hand, confident that his father would act true to form and do nothing. Which is exactly what happened. Joab went to David and convinced him to see Absalom, which he agreed to do. From all appearances, it seems that David pardoned Absalom, kissing his son and restoring him to his former state. Absalom got what he wanted, but he would not be satisfied. He had had plenty of time to consider his future and plan his next moves. This would prove to be the first step in his plan to take capitalize on he perceived to be his father's leadership flaws.

The text gives an interesting, and somewhat out-of-context, description of Absalom's appearance. It describes his good looks and provides detailed information about the thickness of his hair. All this talk about Absalom's appearance seems out of place and a bit odd. However, it is designed to set the stage for what is to come. Absalom is handsome. In fact, the text states, "He was flawless from head to foot" (2 Samuel 14:25 NLT). Not only that, but he was also clever. He was a natural-born leader who had good looks, charisma, charm, and the powers of persuasion that would make any politician envious. Now that he was out from under any threat of punishment for his murder of Amnon, Absalom was going to use his good looks and natural leadership skills to plan his future, which would include his father's downfall.

The apostle Paul provides another warning to fathers in his letter to the Colossians. He writes, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart" (Colossians 3:21 NASB). David had frustrated his son. He had done nothing to bring justice to the cause of Tamar. He had left his own daughter in a state of mourning, having had her virginity taken from her by force. The law clearly stated what David should have done.

> *If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her. He may not divorce her all his days.* – Deuteronomy 22:28-29 ESV

According to the law, David should have forced Amnon to marry Tamar, and forbidden him from ever divorcing her. No longer a virgin, Tamar would have been considered "damaged goods" by the men in her community. Her value as a potential wife had been irreparably marred. Because of his indecisiveness, David left a wake of disaster and damaged lives. His inaction had left Amnon unpunished and Tamar a humiliated and unwanted woman. His unwillingness to do the right thing had only resulted in a host of wrong outcomes. Absalom had killed Amnon and then spent three years in exile. Even when he was allowed to return home, Absalom found himself in a frustrating limbo, trapped by his father's unwillingness to do his job as a father and his duties as a king. And all of this would lead to further resentment on Absalom's part that would ultimately surface as rebellion.

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2 Samuel 15:1-6

Filling A Void

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. – 2 Samuel 15:1-6 ESV

There are many things we could say about Absalom, mosty of them negative. But he was anything but impatient. He had spent two full years plotting his revenge against Amnon. Then he had spent three years living in self-imposed exile in Geshur, waiting to see what his father would do in reaction to his murder of Amnon. When David finally agreed to allow Absalom to return, he waited another two years, confined to his home, because his father refused to either pardon or punish him. As Chapter 15 will reveal, Absalom was willing to bide his time for another four years, quietly and patiently plotting his next move. Yes, Absalom was patient. He was willing to wait. But as he waited, he was far from idle, using the time to his advantage and as preparation for the next phase of his plan.

After David had restored him to favor, Absalom got busy. He was well aware of the flaw in his father's leadership abilities. He had personally experienced David's predilection to procrastination and inaction. He had also been the beneficiary of David's reluctance to enact justice as God's appointed judge of Israel. As Absalom made his way around the capital of Jerusalem, interfacing with the people of Israel, he became more and more convinced that his father's weaknesses could be exploited to his own advantage. Absalom was an ambitious young man who had shown a propensity for taking matters into his own hands. When David had done nothing to punish Amnon for his rape of Tamar, Absalom stepped in. When Joab had refused to respond to his repeated requests for an audience with David, he got Joab's attention by having his barley fields set on fire. Absalom was a doer. He was driven and determined. And when he saw the flaw in David's armor, he determined to strike a blow.

But Absalom was also cunning and clever. He would have made a great politician. He didn't personally attack David or expose his weaknesses to the press. He simply began a quiet campaign to win over the hearts of the people. He slowly and subtly created doubt and suspicion in their minds regarding David's leadership over them and love for them. First, he began a carefully crafted publicity campaign. He had been out of sight for five years, so it was important that he establish an attractive image with the people. He wanted to portray himself as a leader, and it didn't hurt that he was blessed with good looks.

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> *Now Absalom was praised as the most handsome man in all Israel. He was flawless from head to foot.* – 2 Samuel 14:25 NLT

And he was a family man.

> *He had three sons and one daughter. His daughter's name was Tamar, and she was very beautiful.* – 2 Samuel 14:27 NLT

Now, all he needed was the trappings of success. So, he bought himself some wheels.

> *Absalom bought a chariot and horses, and he hired fifty bodyguards to run ahead of him.* – 2 Samuel 15:1 NLT

Next, he took his show on the road. What a sight he made each morning when he arrived at the city gate. No one would have missed his flashy chariot and attention-getting entourage. This was Absalom, the son of the king. He was handsome, apparently successful, and, on top of that, a man of the people. You see, Absalom knew that the key to successfully running the nation was to win over the hearts of its citizens. So, he devised a plan to do just that. His strategy of going to the city gate each morning was brilliant. It was at the city gate that all business was conducted and justice dispensed. The people would come there to have their disputes mediated and complaints heard. David was to have his appointed judges and rulers ready to hear from his people and assist with their problems. But evidently, David had been lax in providing the judgment and justice a growing city required, and the people were not happy. The crowds gathered each day, expecting justice, but walked away with their expectations unmet. So, Absalom exploited the situation.

His arrival each day would not have gone unnoticed. He went out of his way to ensure that the people saw him not only a person of power and influence, but also as a man who cared about their needs. The text states, "When people brought a case to the king for judgment, Absalom would ask where in Israel they were from…" (2 Samuel 15:2 NLT). He would listen to their problem and then assure them, "You've really got a strong case here! It's too bad the king doesn't have anyone to hear it. I wish I were the judge. Then everyone could bring their cases to me for judgment, and I would give them justice!" (2 Samuel 15:3-4 NLT).

Like the serpent in the garden, Absalom sowed seeds of doubt and led the people to question David's care and concern for their needs. Without attacking David directly, Absalom undermined his father's credibility with the people. After all, Absalom was there at the gate. He was talking and listening directly to the people. Where was David? Was he too busy to take care of his people? Was he too good to show up at the gate and listen to the problems facing the citizens of his kingdom?

Absalom was sly and crafty. He was coldly calculating in all that he did. When the people began to see him as someone who cared and who might be willing to assist them with their needs, they treated him with honor and respect, bowing down before him. But Absalom did the

unthinkable and unexpected. Instead of allowing the people to honor him as some kind of dignitary, he embraced them in his arms and treated them as his equal. And his ploy worked.

> *Absalom did this with everyone who came to the king for judgment, and so he stole the hearts of all the people of Israel.* – 2 Samuel 15:6 NLT

An interesting side note in all of this is found in the Book of Deuteronomy. It contains a somewhat obscure law regarding what to do with a rebellious son. The fascinating thing about this law is where it was to be enacted: At the city gate.

> *"If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear."* – Deuteronomy 21:18-21 ESV

So, here we have Absalom, the king's son, who has already murdered his brother, now plotting the overthrow of his father's kingdom. And where is he attempting to sow the seeds of doubt that will later blossom into the fruit of rebellion? The city gate. The very place where Absalom should have been brought to have his crime against Amnon judged and his execution enacted, was where he would begin his rebellion against David.

Once again, we see David's failure to act decisively coming back to haunt him. We must ask ourselves why it was so easy for Absalom to win over the hearts of the people. Had they become disgruntled and disenchanted with all of David's well-publicized moral failings? There is little doubt that rumors regarding David's affair with Bathsheba had gotten out. Most likely, the news of Uriah's death had spread, and the questions regarding the circumstances surrounding his death would have been many. The whole situation with Amnon and Tamar would not have gone unnoticed by the people of Jerusalem. The murder of the king's son by his brother would have been headline news. And the very fact that Absalom had returned and seemed to be doing quite well for himself had not escaped the notice of the people. There is also the likelihood that David was too busy with affairs of state to effectively listen to and address the needs of his people. It was probably about this time that David was busying himself with the construction of his palace and a place to house the Ark of the Covenant. He was also making preparations and plans for the future construction of the temple. David was a busy man. But had he become too busy to care for his own people? This reminds us that David had been called by God to "shepherd My people Israel" (2 Samuel 5:2). But somewhere along the way, David had begun to lose the trust of his sheep. They had wandered and were easy prey for someone as crafty and cunning as Absalom. David had left a void, and Absalom was more than willing to fill it. The sheep were hungry for justice, and Absalom was prepared to feed them right from his hand and win their hearts.

2 Samuel 15:7-12

The Power of Words

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 Samuel 15:7-12 ESV

Another four years would pass before Absalom made the next move in his plan to overthrow his father and take the throne of Israel. The Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which was completed between 300 and 200 BC, records the time length of Absalom's wait as 40 years. However, this would seem to be a scribal error, as the length of time does not align with the chronological circumstances surrounding the story. But during his wait, Absalom had been anything but idle. He was carefully and craftily planning for the day when he would launch his attempted coup. And the day had arrived.

Absalom requested permission from David to return to Hebron, the town in which he was born, to offer sacrifices to God. The reason he gave for this trip was that it was in keeping with a vow he had made to God while he had been in exile in Geshur. He had promised God that, in exchange for his safe return to Jerusalem, he would offer sacrifices to Him in Hebron. It seems to escape David's notice that Absalom had waited at least six years to keep this vow to God. There had been plenty of time for him to go to Hebron. Why now? But this question doesn't seem to cross David's mind. He gave Absalom his permission and his blessing, saying, "Go in peace" (2 Samuel 15:9 ESV).

Little did David know, that his son was plotting his overthrow. As soon as Absalom got David's okay, he sent spies to all the tribes of Israel to prepare for the next phase of his plan. These men were to spread the news of Absalom's coup by telling the people, "As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then say, 'Absalom is king at Hebron!'" (2Samuel 15:10 ESV). He had established a network of spies throughout the kingdom that would help announce the news of his kingship as soon as the time was right. This little tidbit of information suggests that Absalom had been winning over the hearts of the people throughout Israel, not just within the walls of Jerusalem. He had been busy priming the pump and preparing the people for his takeover of David's kingdom. And it would begin with his inauguration as king in Hebron.

Absalom had invited 200 guests to join him. We are not told who these individuals were, but they were most likely influential leaders and individuals with whom he had established close

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relationships. The text tells us that they were ignorant of his plan: "They went in their innocence and knew nothing" (2 Samuel 15:11 ESV). But when Absalom sent for Ahithophel, one of David's personal counselors, to join him in Hebron, it would seem to indicate that there were others involved in the plot. This whole thing had been well-planned and carefully orchestrated. The momentum was shifting in Absalom's favor.

> *…the conspiracy grew strong, and the people with Absalom kept increasing*. – 2 Samuel 15:12 ESV

Once again, Absalom is biding his time. His was going to be a coup based on a strong public relations strategy. He was going to win through insinuation and incitement. He was going to defeat the mighty David through the spreading of rumors and the sowing of doubt. He was slowly setting himself up as the rightful and logical replacement for the not-to-be-trusted king of Israel. He was busy portraying David as immoral, unjust, an incompetent leader, and an uncaring judge. Absalom would win the kingdom without ever having to draw his sword and fight a single battle. He would win this war in the court of public opinion. He would take advantage of the people's discontentment and foment increasing dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. If Absalom had had access to the power of social media as we know it today, his efforts would have taken far less time. We know first-hand how destructive and effective words can be. Whether it's a Facebook post criticizing the current administration or a Twitter feed promoting a new product, these seemingly innocuous and ubiquitous bits of information can be powerful. They are a regular and ordinary part of our lives. We have seen careers ruined, political campaigns derailed, rumors become reality, lies be taken as truth, and uninformed opinions shared in ignorance and without discretion become the seeds of revolution.

Absalom understood the power of words. He knew the destructive nature of innuendo and insinuation. Given enough time, he would be able to take down the most powerful man in the kingdom without a fight. David's reputation would be destroyed and his throne taken by a war of words and an onslaught of rumors, half-truths, and intimations regarding his leadership and moral character. But so much of it had been the result of his own sinful indiscretions and indecisive reactions to the events surrounding his life. He had brought this on himself. Absalom had simply exploited David's weaknesses. And his determination to do so to his own father reveals the depth of his dissatisfaction and disdain for David. He was a son who had long ago lost any respect or regard for his father. He saw David, not as a dad to be honored, but as an unfit king who deserved to be taken down.

David would later write in one of his psalms:

> *O God, you take no pleasure in wickedness;*
> *you cannot tolerate the sins of the wicked.*
> *Therefore, the proud may not stand in your presence,*
> *for you hate all who do evil.*

You will destroy those who tell lies.
The Lord detests murderers and deceivers. – Psalm 5:4-6 NLT

Absalom was wicked and proud. He was a murderer and deceiver. He was a liar and a lover of evil. And, as we will see, his plan to overthrow his father and take his throne would be successful. But God would have the last word. In the book of Proverbs, compiled by Solomon, God's chosen successor to David's throne, we read the following words:

The plans of the godly are just;
the advice of the wicked is treacherous.

The words of the wicked are like a murderous ambush,
but the words of the godly save lives. – Proverbs 12:5-6 NLT

While David had made many mistakes and was responsible for much of the pain he was about to suffer, he was still a man after God's own heart. He still longed to serve his God and care for the kingdom he had been given to rule and reign over. He had not always done it well or with integrity, but his intentions were good. Absalom, on the other hand, was an impetuous, headstrong upstart who cared more for himself than anyone else. He could not be trusted. His words, while powerful and effective, were deceitful and ungodly. Nothing Absalom had planned or put into action had been done with God's guidance or approval. He had acted according to his own wicked heart. His motives had been purely selfish, driven by revenge, and fueled by hatred.
Years later, Solomon would write a proverb addressed to his son. Perhaps he had his own brother Absalom in mind when he penned these words:

My child, pay attention to what I say.
Listen carefully to my words.
Don't lose sight of them.
Let them penetrate deep into your heart,
for they bring life to those who find them,
and healing to their whole body.
Guard your heart above all else,
for it determines the course of your life. – Proverbs 4:20-23 NLT

Centuries later, Jesus, a descendant of David, would pick up on this same theme:

But the words you speak come from the heart—that's what defiles you. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you. – Matthew 15:18-20 NLT

Absalom's actions reveal the condition of his heart. His words, while initially the cause of his rise to power, will be the reason for his demise and the source of his condemnation.

2 Samuel 15:13-37

Mourning Comes Before Morning

But David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, barefoot and with his head covered. And all the people who were with him covered their heads, and they went up, weeping as they went. And it was told David, "Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom." And David said, "O Lord, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness."

While David was coming to the summit, where God was worshiped, behold, Hushai the Archite came to meet him with his coat torn and dirt on his head. David said to him, "If you go on with me, you will be a burden to me. But if you return to the city and say to Absalom, 'I will be your servant, O king; as I have been your father's servant in time past, so now I will be your servant,' then you will defeat for me the counsel of Ahithophel. Are not Zadok and Abiathar the priests with you there? So whatever you hear from the king's house, tell it to Zadok and Abiathar the priests. Behold, their two sons are with them there, Ahimaaz, Zadok's son, and Jonathan, Abiathar's son, and by them you shall send to me everything you hear." So Hushai, David's friend, came into the city, just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem. – 2 Samuel 15:13-37 ESV

As David made his way out of the city of David, he did so in a state of mourning. He headed east toward the Mount of Olives, barefoot and with his head covered. He led a sizeable retinue of household servants, personal bodyguards, members of his royal administration, and armed soldiers. It is interesting to contrast this scene with the one in which David led the way as the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the gates of Jerusalem. At that point, David had been headed in the opposite direction and was in a significantly different mood. He was dancing and leaping, joyfully leading the procession that contained the Ark of God. Now, years later, the Ark was in Jerusalem, but David was on his way out. On this occasion, there was no music, no dancing, and no joy. David was on his way out, abandoning his capital and abdicating his throne to his son Absalom. David and all those with him were weeping as they went. To make matters worse, David received the disappointing news that one of his own counselors, Ahithophel, had chosen to remain behind and serve Absalom. Not only that, Ahithophel is revealed to have been a co-conspirator with Absalom. He was not just switching sides at the end; he had played a role in the entire enterprise, providing Absalom with counsel and advice along the way.

David's response was simple and came in the form of a prayer: "O Lord, let Ahithophel give Absalom foolish advice!" (2 Samuel 15:31 NLT). He didn't rant, rave, or hurl invectives against Ahithophel. He simply asked God to turn the wisdom of Ahithophel into foolishness. Then, David did what he could to counter Ahithophel's betrayal. He asked his good friend, Hushai, to return to the city and act as his eyes and ears, and to serve as an inside source, providing Absalom with advice that directly opposed that of Ahithophel

> *"Return to Jerusalem and tell Absalom, 'I will now be your adviser, O king, just as I was your father's adviser in the past.' Then you can frustrate and counter Ahithophel's advice."* – 2 Samuel 15:34 NLT

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David was down, but not out. He was in mourning, but he was not giving up. He was setting up his own network of spies to gather inside information regarding Absalom's plans. He had evidently prearranged with Abiathar and Zadok, the priests, to use their sons as messengers, providing David with much-needed intelligence about all that was happening in the kingdom while he was in exile. As bleak and bad as things looked, David still had friends. There were still those who were willing to stand beside him at one of the darkest moments in his life. And while David's actions and demeanor portray a man who has all but given up, it seems that he is merely being realistic. He knows that, for the time being, he has lost his kingdom to his son. He doesn't know why, and he is not yet sure if this is a permanent situation or simply another detour in God's plan for his life. Rather than risk a pitched battle with Absalom and subject the city of Jerusalem to destruction and its inhabitants to death, David left of his own free will. He was sad, but still expectant. He was in mourning, but remained hopeful. He put in place measures that would provide him with vital intelligence and enable him to influence Absalom's actions from the inside.

The days ahead were going to be difficult and, at times, very dark. The worst had not yet come. There would be more devastating news and difficult circumstances in David's future. He would be ridiculed, reviled, and rejected as king. He would find himself living in exile from his own kingdom. Yet, in the back of his mind, he would always have to wrestle with the seeming incongruity of his anointing by God to be king and the lightning-fast fall of his kingship. What was God doing? Why was all of this happening? Was it because of his sins? Was it the punishment of God for all he had done concerning Bathsheba and Uriah?

There will be days in the life of every believer that seem to make no sense. We will each find ourselves battling the dark nights of the soul that make us question what we have done to offend God. Sometimes God is slow in giving us answers to our questions or explanations to the seemingly confusing events surrounding our lives. At times, we find ourselves suffering the ramifications of our poor decision-making. At other times, the consequences of past sins catch up with us, leaving us confused and conflicted about what God is doing and why. The days ahead for David were going to be dark and difficult. He would have more questions than answers. All along the way, he would be tempted to give up in despair or lash out in anger. He would find himself struggling to balance waiting on God with working things out on his own. Should he fight or flee? Should he give up or faithfully wait for God to show up?

It is in the trials of life that we find our faith in God tested and our understanding of who He is exposed as flawed and one-dimensional. David's circumstances had changed dramatically, but his God remained the same. David's power had diminished significantly, but not God's. David was no longer on his throne, but God was. From David's perspective, it would have been easy to see everything as bleak, but God had a different view on things, and He was not yet done with David. Absalom loomed large in David's life, but he was insignificant to God. Our darkest days can provide the perfect backdrop for the light of God's goodness, love, power ,and deliverance to shine.

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2 Samuel 16:1-14

Dazed and Confused, Yet Confident

When David had passed a little beyond the summit, Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth met him, with a couple of donkeys saddled, bearing two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred bunches of raisins, a hundred of summer fruits, and a skin of wine. And the king said to Ziba, "Why have you brought these?" Ziba answered, "The donkeys are for the king's household to ride on, the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat, and the wine for those who faint in the wilderness to drink." And the king said, "And where is your master's son?" Ziba said to the king, "Behold, he remains in Jerusalem, for he said, 'Today the house of Israel will give me back the kingdom of my father.'" Then the king said to Ziba, "Behold, all that belonged to Mephibosheth is now yours." And Ziba said, "I pay homage; let me ever find favor in your sight, my lord the king."

When King David came to Bahurim, there came out a man of the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei, the son of Gera, and as he came he cursed continually. And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David, and all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. 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."

Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head." 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." So David and his men went on the road, while Shimei went along on the hillside opposite him and cursed as he went and threw stones at him and flung dust. And the king, and all the people who were with him, arrived weary at the Jordan. And there he refreshed himself .– 2 Samuel 16:1-14 ESV

With each step David took, the news got worse. All he was trying to do was leave the city in peace, and before he could get past the summit of the Mount of Olives, yet another individual showed up with bad news. Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth, arrived with a couple of donkeys loaded down with supplies. When David asked Ziba why he had come, the servant explained that Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan and grandson of Saul, had decided to align himself with Absalom, in the hope of regaining what was rightfully his as the heir to the former king. Ziba's news must have stung David deeply, because he had shown mercy and love to Mephibosheth, allowing him to live in his palace and eat at his table. He had kept a vow he had made to Mephibosheth's father and now, Mephibosheth was returning the favor with betrayal.

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But later in the story, it will be revealed that Ziba was lying. When David eventually returned to Jerusalem, Mephibosheth was one of the first ones to greet him, and he explained what really happened that day.

> *Now Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson, came down from Jerusalem to meet the king. He had not cared for his feet, trimmed his beard, or washed his clothes since the day the king left Jerusalem. "Why didn't you come with me, Mephibosheth?" the king asked him.*
>
> *Mephibosheth replied, "My lord the king, my servant Ziba deceived me. I told him, 'Saddle my donkey so I can go with the king.' For as you know I am crippled. Ziba has slandered me by saying that I refused to come. But I know that my lord the king is like an angel of God, so do what you think is best."* – 2 Samuel 19:24-27 NLT

But when Ziba showed up, David couldn't know what was really going on, and, at that point, David would not have been surprised by anything he heard. That Mephibosheth might have betrayed him was not shocking news to David. He took it in stride and determined to reward Ziba for his kindness by giving him all that belonged to Mephibosheth. Of course, this reward would remain unclaimed by Ziba as long as David remained in exile and Absalom was on the throne.

The next thing that happened to David was even more disconcerting. As he and his retinue continued their escape, they passed by the town of Bahurim, where a man named Shemei came out and began to verbally assault David, cursing him and accusing him of being a man of bloodshed. As David went on his way, the man followed, spewing his words of anger and resentment and throwing stones at the former king. Shimei was a relative of Saul, and he harbored a long-standing resentment toward David for having replaced Saul as king of Israel. He even seems to blame David for Saul's death, as well as that of Abner and Jonathan. His accusation that David was a man of bloodshed was another statement that must have hit David hard. While David knew he had played no part in the deaths of Saul, Jonathan, or Abner, he would have been reminded of his role in the death of Uriah. He likely recalled his refusal to deal with the actions of his own son, Amnon, which eventually led to Amnon's murder by Absalom. David was a man of bloodshed. He knew it well and lived with the knowledge of that fact every day of his life. And while he had been forgiven by God, he would never forget the events of his life that led to the discipline of God. Even now, David could not be sure whether all of this was yet another demonstration of God's displeasure with him.

Shemei's words were harsh and unrelenting in their denigration of David.

> *"Get out of here, you murderer, you scoundrel!" he shouted at David. "The Lord is paying you back for all the bloodshed in Saul's clan. You stole his throne, and now the Lord has given it to your son Absalom. At last you will taste some of your own medicine, for you are a murderer!"* – 2 Samuel 16:7-8 NLT

David was dazed and confused. He was reeling from the rapid-fire series of events that had left him without a throne and on his way into exile for the second time in his life. What had happened? How did everything fall apart so quickly and unexpectedly? What was God doing? And what had David done to deserve it?

There are moments in all of our lives when we question what God is up to. We struggle with understanding the nature of the events surrounding our lives and, almost immediately, begin to wonder what we have done to make God angry with us. We tend to see the presence of disorder or disaster in our lives as a sign of God's displeasure with us. David would have felt the same way. He was unsure of the cause behind these events, but almost automatically assumed it had something to do with him and was the result of something he had done. He was trying to trust God, but it was a difficult task. Wave after wave of bad news engulfed him, leaving him reeling and wondering what he had done to deserve this fate.

When we find ourselves in difficult circumstances, there will always be well-meaning friends who step in to give us advice. In their effort to ease our pain, they will say things meant to encourage and comfort us, but so often, their words lack Scriptural support or the authority of God. Abishai, out of love for David, offered to silence Shimei by cutting off his head. While that would have done the trick, David refused, saying, "If the Lord has told him to curse me, who are you to stop him?" (2 Samuel 16:10 NLT). David was not willing to commit further bloodshed to eliminate this discomfort in his life. If it was God-ordained, then there was nothing to be done. He went on to tell Abishai and all those with him, "My own son is trying to kill me. Doesn't this relative of Saul have even more reason to do so? Leave him alone and let him curse, for the Lord has told him to do it. And perhaps the Lord will see that I am being wronged and will bless me because of these curses today" (2 Samuel 16:11-12 NLT).

It is easy to believe that removing discomfort from our lives will solve our problems. We can convince ourselves that eliminating whatever is bothering us is the key to restoring our joy and contentment. But David knew that his hope was in the Lord. Killing Shimei would not resolve his problem. Silencing the words of an angry man would not make David's life any better or easier. Only God could bring peace amid the chaos and restore David's joy. David had a strong belief that all things come from the hand of the Lord. He believed in the sovereignty and providence of God. Like Job, David lived by the mantra, "Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" (Job 2:10 NLT). David was dazed and confused, but he was confident that God was in control. He may not have fully understood why these things were happening, but he was fully assured that God knew. And in time, God would make His plan and purposes plain.

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2 Samuel 17:1-14

The Lord Has Ordained

Moreover, Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue David tonight. I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged and throw him into a panic, and all the people who are with him will flee. I will strike down only the king, and I will bring all the people back to you as a bride comes home to her husband. You seek the life of only one man, and all the people will be at peace." And the advice seemed right in the eyes of Absalom and all the elders of Israel.

Then Absalom said, "Call Hushai the Archite also, and let us hear what he has to say." And when Hushai came to Absalom, Absalom said to him, "Thus has Ahithophel spoken; shall we do as he says? If not, you speak." Then Hushai said to Absalom, "This time the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good." Hushai said, "You know that your father and his men are mighty men, and that they are enraged, like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field. Besides, your father is expert in war; he will not spend the night with the people. Behold, even now he has hidden himself in one of the pits or in some other place. And as soon as some of the people fall at the first attack, whoever hears it will say, 'There has been a slaughter among the people who follow Absalom.' Then even the valiant man, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will utterly melt with fear, for all Israel knows that your father is a mighty man, and that those who are with him are valiant men. But my counsel is that all Israel be gathered to you, from Dan to Beersheba, as the sand by the sea for multitude, and that you go to battle in person. So we shall come upon him in some place where he is to be found, and we shall light upon him as the dew falls on the ground, and of him and all the men with him not one will be left. If he withdraws into a city, then all Israel will bring ropes to that city, and we shall drag it into the valley, until not even a pebble is to be found there." And Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel." For the Lord had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the Lord might bring harm upon Absalom. – 2 Samuel 17:1-14 ESV

It is impossible to discern the will of God unless He chooses to reveal it. All we can do is examine the external circumstances and wonder what He is doing or whether He is doing anything at all. Paul told the believers in Rome, "Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways!" (Romans 11:33 NLT). Solomon, David's own son, spoke of the unfathomable ways of God in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

> *He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.*
> – Ecclesiastes 3:11 NLT

Sometimes it is clear what God is doing. At other times, it is almost impossible for us to even sense His presence. However, the Bible portrays a picture of God that reveals Him as intimately

involved in His creation and in the lives of humanity. Due to our limited, earth-bound perspectives and inability to see beyond the physical dimension in which we live, we often fail to recognize God at work. Even when we sense He might be up to something, we question His ways. But He would have us remember His ways are not our ways.

> *"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."* – Isaiah 55:8-9 NLT

So, when David found himself being forced to abandon the city of Jerusalem because of a military coup orchestrated by his own son, he had no idea what God was up to. He was left to wonder if God was punishing him and had chosen to give his kingdom to another. Perhaps, God had something else in store. David had no idea what God was up to, but he was willing to trust that God was behind all that was happening to him and around him. He had even sent Hushai, one of his personal counselors, back to the city of Jerusalem to act as a spy within the administration of Absalom. This decision, while apparently David's idea, would be used by God to accomplish His will concerning Absalom.

Ahithophel, another one of David's former advisors, had betrayed him, having assisted Absalom in planning the coup that displaced David as king. He had become a close confidant and advisor to Absalom. It was he who had given Absalom the advice to publicly humiliate David by sexually assaulting David's ten concubines on the palace roof. But it is important for us to recall that this event had actually been foretold by God Himself. He had warned David that this very thing would happen, in exactly the manner described (2 Samuel 12:11-12). So Ahithopel's advice to Absalom had actually been the will of God. The Almighty had used this unfaithful, wicked man to accomplish His will concerning David. Now, Ahithophel came to Absalom with yet more advice. This time, God would choose to use another source to accomplish His will. Ahithophel most likely felt like he was on a roll. He had the new king's ear, and it was to his advantage to ensure that David was eliminated as a possible threat. So, he asked Absalom for permission to take 12,000 men and hunt David down while he was weak and weary. He swore to kill only David and promised Absalom, "Then you will be at peace with all the people" (2 Samuel 17:3 NLT).

But God had other plans. So, while Absalom was pleased with Ahithophel's advice, he decided to seek other counsel and turned to Hushai. It is important to remember that David had been the one to send Hushai back to Jerusalem with the following instructions: "Return to Jerusalem and tell Absalom, 'I will now be your adviser, O king, just as I was your father's adviser in the past.' Then you can frustrate and counter Ahithophel's advice" (2 Samuel 16:34 NLT). Now, God orchestrated things in such a way that David's plan would actually happen. Hushai was able to thwart Ahithophel's counsel, but only because God gave him the opportunity. The text makes it perfectly clear that this was all God's doing.

> *For the Lord had determined to defeat the counsel of Ahithophel, which really was the better plan, so that he could bring disaster on Absalom!* – 2 Samuel 17:14 NLT

Hushai got the idea for his plan from God. And it seems likely that Ahithophel's advice for Absalom to violate David's concubines came from God as well. The Lord had ordained and orchestrated every aspect of this event. He was behind all that took place. Absalom's takeover of the kingdom could not have happened without God's permission. Even Ahithophel's betrayal of David was all part of God's plan.

Yet, these very thoughts cause a great deal of discomfort and confusion to many of us. They cause us to wrestle with the thought of God either causing or allowing evil to happen. We struggle with questions regarding the free will of man and the seeming fatalism involved in the sovereign will of God. Did God cause Ahithophel to betray David? Was God behind Absalom's plans to overthrow his father's government? There are aspects of God's will and how He brings it about that we will never fully understand. The ways of God are beyond our capacity to comprehend. The capacity to grasp how God accomplishes His will is way beyond what our finite minds can handle. However, just because we can't discern or explain the ways of God does not mean we should refuse to see Him at work. Moses would have us remember this important reality concerning God:

> *He is the Rock; his deeds are perfect. Everything he does is just and fair. He is a faithful God who does no wrong; how just and upright he is!* – Deuteronomy 32:4 NLT

We may not understand the ways of God. We may not even approve of how He does things. But who are we to question God? What right do we, the creation, have to disagree with or disapprove of how the Creator works? The apostle Paul warns us, "Who are you, a mere human being, to argue with God? Should the thing that was created say to the one who created it, 'Why have you made me like this?'" (Romans 9:20 NLT). The prophet Isaiah had a similar warning:

> *"What sorrow awaits those who argue with their Creator. Does a clay pot argue with its maker? Does the clay dispute with the one who shapes it, saying, 'Stop, you're doing it wrong!' Does the pot exclaim, 'How clumsy can you be?'"* – Isaiah 45:9 NLT

In our desire for autonomy and self-sufficiency, we have bought into the lie that we are in charge of our own fates. That is what led Absalom to do what he did. He had convinced himself to believe that he was a self-made man and in charge of his own future. But he failed to realize that it is God who directs the affairs of men. God does not cause men to sin, but He uses their sinful dispositions to accomplish His divine will. The prophet Isaiah provides us with yet more helpful insights into understanding how God works.

> *He boasts, "By my own powerful arm I have done this. With my own shrewd wisdom I planned it. I have broken down the defenses of nations and carried off their treasures. I have knocked down their kings like a bull. I have robbed their nests of riches and*

> *gathered up kingdoms as a farmer gathers eggs. No one can even flap a wing against me or utter a peep of protest."*
>
> *But can the ax boast greater power than the person who uses it? Is the saw greater than the person who saws? Can a rod strike unless a hand moves it? Can a wooden cane walk by itself?* – Isaiah 10:13-15 NLT

Our natural tendency is to want to elevate human power and negate the sovereign will of God. Man's innate desire to be like God is what drives him to reject the power of God. Yet the story of David continues to remind us that our God is always in control of all things and at all times The Lord had ordained the events surrounding David's life, and He had a perfectly good reason for all that was happening.

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2 Samuel 17:15-29

The Hand of God

Then Hushai said to Zadok and Abiathar the priests, "Thus and so did Ahithophel counsel Absalom and the elders of Israel, and thus and so have I counseled. Now therefore send quickly and tell David, 'Do not stay tonight at the fords of the wilderness, but by all means pass over, lest the king and all the people who are with him be swallowed up.'" Now Jonathan and Ahimaaz were waiting at En-rogel. A female servant was to go and tell them, and they were to go and tell King David, for they were not to be seen entering the city. But a young man saw them and told Absalom. So both of them went away quickly and came to the house of a man at Bahurim, who had a well in his courtyard. And they went down into it. And the woman took and spread a covering over the well's mouth and scattered grain on it, and nothing was known of it. When Absalom's servants came to the woman at the house, they said, "Where are Ahimaaz and Jonathan?" And the woman said to them, "They have gone over the brook of water." And when they had sought and could not find them, they returned to Jerusalem.

After they had gone, the men came up out of the well, and went and told King David. They said to David, "Arise, and go quickly over the water, for thus and so has Ahithophel counseled against you." Then David arose, and all the people who were with him, and they crossed the Jordan. By daybreak not one was left who had not crossed the Jordan.

When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order and hanged himself, and he died and was buried in the tomb of his father.

Then David came to Mahanaim. And Absalom crossed the Jordan with all the men of Israel. Now Absalom had set Amasa over the army instead of Joab. Amasa was the son of a man named Ithra the Ishmaelite, who had married Abigal the daughter of Nahash, sister of Zeruiah, Joab's mother. And Israel and Absalom encamped in the land of Gilead.

When David came to Mahanaim, Shobi the son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Ammonites, and Machir the son of Ammiel from Lo-debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim, brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, flour, parched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds and sheep and cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat, for they said, "The people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness." – 2 Samuel 17:15-29 ESV

The will of God continues to reveal itself as the story unfolds. His divine strategy becomes increasingly clearer as each detail of the narrative takes place. David had sent Hushai, one of his counselors, back to Jerusalem, with instructions to act as his spy in the court of Absalom. Specifically, Hushai was to act as a counselor to Absalom, countering any advice given by Ahithophel, one of David's former counselors who had betrayed him. Hushai had done as David asked and been able to refute Ahithophel's counsel. Had Hushai not been there, Absalom

would have listened to the advice of Ahithophel and sent 12,000 men to hunt David down. David would have been severely outmanned, exhausted by his quick departure from Jerusalem, and burdened by the presence of many defenseless women and children. Had Hushai not been there to provide alternative counsel to Absalom, things could have turned out very badly for David. But God was in control. He gave Hushai the exact words to speak that would appeal to Absalom's inflated ego and inflict the most damage to Ahithophel.

Part of Hushai's advice to Absalom was to assemble a massive army to fight one epic battle against David, and to lead this army personally. Hushai, under the divine inspiration of God, gave counsel that appealed to Absalom's over-inflated sense of self-worth and caused him to reject Ahithophel's counsel. And Ahithophel took this rejection very hard. So much so that he went out and hung himself. Some believe that he did so after the battle between David and Absalom was over, and he knew that his days were numbered. But the text does not indicate that kind of delay. It would appear that Ahithophel had betrayed David so that he could be the one and only counselor to the new king. He had helped Absalom plan his coup. He had gone out of his way to ingratiate himself to David's rebellious son, because he craved power and influence. When Hushai showed up and proved himself capable of winning Absalom's favor, Ahithophel couldn't take it, so, he killed himself. Once again, God was working behind the scenes, orchestrating events in such a way that the outcomes were in David's favor.

Even when Hushai attempted to send David news through their network of spies, and Absalom found out, God stepped in and provided protection for Jonathan and Ahimaaz. They were able to find sanctuary in the house of someone favorable to David. And, when Absalom's men could not locate them, they escaped and warned David of Absalom's plans.

David would have time to prepare for the upcoming battle with Absalom, and one of the first things he had to do was to amass enough men to field an army of his own. But God was on his side, and before David knew it, the necessary forces began to show up, unannounced and uninvited. The text lists the names of Shobi, Machir, and Barzillai. These three men come alongside David, providing him with food and support. David was not alone. These men brought David physical refreshment in the form of food, but more importantly, they offered him much-needed moral support. They offered him their friendship in one of the darkest moments of his life. God was letting David know that all was not lost. This seemingly bleak period of his life was going to have a bright outcome. David did not know what the next day would hold, but he was confident that God was with him.

Sometimes, God reveals Himself to us in the little "miracles" of life. Hushai's counsel had been accepted by Absalom. David's spy network had worked, and God had protected Jonathan and Ahimaaz, so that they could bring David news. Food and moral support had shown up unexpectedly, and at just the right time. And, as we will see in the very next chapter, many others would lend their support to David's cause, allowing him to field an army that numbered in the thousands.

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God was at work. He is not mentioned in this section of Scripture, but His presence and power can be seen. He was active, unseen by human eyes, but clearly evident in the way the events unfolded. You can almost sense the tide turning and the momentum shifting. Absalom had been on a roll, with everything going his way. He could do nothing wrong. He had taken the city of Jerusalem without a fight and stolen his father's kingdom in a bloodless coup. He had won the hearts of the people, and the future looked bright. But he could not see the hand of God. He was oblivious to what God was doing and what God had in store for him. Little did he know that his co-conspirator and primary counselor had hanged himself. And before long, Absalom would find himself hanging by his hair from a tree. Because the hand of God is greater than the armies of man.

You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail. – Proverbs 19:21 NLT

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2 Samuel 18:1-18

Will the Real King Stand Up?

Then David mustered the men who were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. And David sent out the army, one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the command of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the men, "I myself will also go out with you." But the men said, "You shall not go out. For if we flee, they will not care about us. If half of us die, they will not care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us. Therefore it is better that you send us help from the city." The king said to them, "Whatever seems best to you I will do." So the king stood at the side of the gate, while all the army marched out by hundreds and by thousands. And the king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders about Absalom.

So the army went out into the field against Israel, and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. 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. The battle spread over the face of all the country, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword.

And Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak, and his head caught fast in the oak, and he was suspended between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. And a certain man saw it and told Joab, "Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak." Joab said to the man who told him, "What, you saw him! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have been glad to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt." But the man said to Joab, "Even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I would not reach out my hand against the king's son, for in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, 'For my sake protect the young man Absalom.' On the other hand, if I had dealt treacherously against his life (and there is nothing hidden from the king), then you yourself would have stood aloof." Joab said, "I will not waste time like this with you." And he took three javelins in his hand and thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the oak. And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him.

Then Joab blew the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained them. And they took Absalom and threw him into a great pit in the forest and raised over him a very great heap of stones. And all Israel fled every one to his own home. Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself the pillar that is in the King's Valley, for he said, "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance." He called the pillar after his own name, and it is called Absalom's monument to this day. – 2 Samuel 18:1-18 ESV

Like a modern-day soap opera, there are so many plots and sub-plots going on in this passage that it is difficult to know exactly what the main point is. There's the battle between the forces

of David and those of Absalom. There is Joab mortally wounding Absalom, providing what would appear to be a well-justified payback for his rebellion. But what Joab did was against David's direct orders, which brings up another intriguing sub-plot. Why was David, yet again, unwilling to enact justice against a rebellious son? He had failed to punish Amnon for his rape of Tamar. He had also failed to mete out justice on Absalom for his murder of Amnon, which eventually led to Absalom's loss of respect for David and his overthrow of his kingdom.

And finally, we come across an interesting side note that tells of Absalom having erected a monument to himself. That part shouldn't surprise us, because we have seen ample evidence of his pride. But what is significant is the statement, "I have no son to carry on my name" (2 Samuel 18:18 NLT). How could that be? According to 2 Samuel 14:27, Absalom had three sons and a daughter. What would possess him to say that he had no son to carry on his name? Perhaps his sons had refused to follow in their father's footsteps. There is the possibility that they had all died. Or it could be that Absalom had erected the monument before his sons had been born. But whatever the case, Absalom left a lasting memorial to himself by erecting a monument that bore his name. He died alone and with nothing but a self-erected monument to carry on his legacy.

Nothing ever seems to be tidy when it comes to the life of David. This section is no different than any of the others we have read. There are so many complications and conflicts going on that it is difficult to keep up. The battle between David and Absalom's forces, as significant as it was, is nothing compared to all the mini-conflicts taking place behind the scenes. David had commanded explicitly that Absalom be spared. Yet Joab, the commander of his army and the one who had convinced David to allow Absalom to return to Jerusalem in the first place (2 Samuel 14), disobeyed those orders. Easily overlooked in all of this is the fact that more than 20,000 Israelites lost their lives that day. This had been a civil war, an internecine conflict between brothers. David lost a son, but as a result of his failure to deal with Absalom's original sin against Amnon, David caused many Israelites to lose their fathers, sons, and brothers. There would be 20,000 graves dug that day. There would be countless mothers, fathers, wives, brothers, and sisters mourning the loss of someone they loved. And all of this can be traced back to David's sin with Bathsheba. Absalom would be the third son that David lost as a result of his moral indiscretion.

In Psalm 63, written while he was hiding in the wilderness, David penned the following words:

> *But those plotting to destroy me will come to ruin.*
> *They will go down into the depths of the earth.*
> *They will die by the sword*
> *and become the food of jackals.*
> *But the king will rejoice in God.*
> *All who swear to tell the truth will praise him,*
> *while liars will be silenced.* – Psalm 63:9-11 NLT

David believed in the vengeance of God, but it seems he had a hard time seeing it applied to one of his own. David's command that the life of Absalom be spared does not reflect well on his leadership. It speaks of his regret and recognition that all of this was his fault. He was reticent to punish Absalom, but his unwillingness to deal with Absalom's rebellion set a dangerous precedence. He needed to reestablish his authority and nip this thing in the bud. However, it was Joab, disobeying a direct order from the king, who ultimately did what needed to be done. Joab was forced to go against the king's wishes and risk his retribution, but he did the right thing. The rebellion ended, its leader was eliminated, and David's reign over Israel was restored. And it is important to note that David played no part in any of it. On the advice of Joab, David remained behind, safe, sound, and out of any danger. Perhaps Joab had known that, had David gone into battle, he would have spared the life of Absalom. So, he had recommended that David stay behind.

With all that happened in this passage, we must not lose sight of the fact that God was in control. The events recorded in these verses are an expression of God's will concerning Absalom and David. From God's perspective, Absalom was a usurper to the throne. He had no right to claim the kingship of Israel. David was still the Lord's anointed. All of this was part of God's plan to deal with Absalom's sin against Amnon. David may have been willing to overlook and forget what Absalom had done, but God was not. The rebellion of Absalom should have been a wake-up call to David about just how dangerous it can be to turn a blind eye toward sin. Absalom's rebellion, while successful, was destined to be short-lived because it did not have God's backing. It was simply a means by which God would repay Absalom while teaching David yet another vital lesson about divine justice.

As the story unfolds, it will reveal David weeping over the loss of Absalom. But we will not see him shed a single tear for the unnecessary loss of life that came as a result of Absalom's rebellion. There will be no mention of the 10 concubines violated by Absalom on the palace rooftop. David would return to power, but over a fractured and divided nation. And his continual mourning over the loss of his son would send a confusing message to those who had fought to restore his kingdom to him. Absalom was dead, but the difficulties were far from over. David had his work cut out for him, and it was going to take Joab, once again, to help David do the right thing. God would use this faithful friend to speak truth into David's life, convicting and compelling him to do what God wanted him to do.

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2 Samuel 18:19-33

Ungratefulness for God's Faithfulness

Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said, "Let me run and carry news to the king that the Lord has delivered him from the hand of his enemies." And Joab said to him, "You are not to carry news today. You may carry news another day, but today you shall carry no news, because the king's son is dead." Then Joab said to the Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have seen." The Cushite bowed before Joab, and ran. Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said again to Joab, "Come what may, let me also run after the Cushite." And Joab said, "Why will you run, my son, seeing that you will have no reward for the news?" "Come what may," he said, "I will run." So he said to him, "Run." Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the plain, and outran the Cushite.

Now David was sitting between the two gates, and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and when he lifted up his eyes and looked, he saw a man running alone. The watchman called out and told the king. And the king said, "If he is alone, there is news in his mouth." And he drew nearer and nearer. The watchman saw another man running. And the watchman called to the gate and said, "See, another man running alone!" The king said, "He also brings news." The watchman said, "I think the running of the first is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok." And the king said, "He is a good man and comes with good news."

Then Ahimaaz cried out to the king, "All is well." And he bowed before the king with his face to the earth and said, "Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king." And the king said, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent the king's servant, your servant, I saw a great commotion, but I do not know what it was." And the king said, "Turn aside and stand here." So he turned aside and stood still.

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." 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." 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 18:19-33 ESV

David sent his troops into battle against the superior forces of his son, Absalom, while he remained behind. As the day wore on, he could do nothing but wonder what had happened. This was a winner-takes-all battle that would determine whether David would regain his throne, spend his life in exile, or lose his life to his son. So, when Joab and his troops won a great victory and had done away with Absalom, they sent word to David. But Joab knew exactly how David would respond. He had been fully aware of David's command to spare the life of Absalom, but he had disobeyed. He had personally driven three spears into the body of David's rebellious son as he helplessly hung from a tree, his long hair caught in its branches.

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Ahimaaz, the son of Zadok the priest, had already been chosen by David to be a courier, bringing him any news taking place within the walls of Jerusalem. So, he offered to be the one to inform David of the great victory. However, Joab knew that this news would not be well received by David. He knew David well and had seen how he had treated other messengers who bore bad news (2 Samuel 1). As a result, he sent a Cushite, a foreigner, to tell David of the victory and subsequent death of his son. Yet, Ahimaaz, determined to be the one to give David the news, outran the Cushite. When he arrived at David's camp, he only told him of the victory over the Israelites. He pleaded ignorance regarding Absalom's physical well-being. Perhaps he didn't know what had happened, or he chose tolie, desiring to win favor with David by being the first to tell him the good news of the victory. He would let the Cushite be the bearer of bad news, and bad news it was. David's reaction says it all.

> *The king was overcome with emotion. He went up to the room over the gateway and burst into tears. And as he went, he cried, "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son."* – 2 Samuel 18:33 NLT

David doesn't say a word about the victory. He shows no gratitude to either Ahimaaz or the Cushite for bringing him news that his kingdom had been restored. Even these two young men recognized the hand of God in the day's events. Ahimaaz had announced to David:

> *"Praise to the Lord your God, who has handed over the rebels who dared to stand against my lord the king."* – 2 Samuel 18:28 NLT

The Cushite had responded similarly:

> *"I have good news for my lord the king. Today the Lord has rescued you from all those who rebelled against you."* – 2 Samuel 18:31 NLT

There is a passage in the Book of Isaiah that reflects the perspective David should have had when he received the news of God's miraculous deliverance of his kingdom.

> *How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, the good news of peace and salvation, the news that the God of Israel reigns!* – Isaiah 52:7 NLT

But rather than celebrate the salvation of God, David mourned the loss of his son. He even wished that he had been the one to die that day, instead of Absalom. This ingratitude toward God was evident to all those around David. It shocked and surprised them. David was taking the divine deliverance of God and treating it with disdain. It was one thing to mourn and regret the loss of his son, but he had an obligation as the God-anointed king of Israel to lead his people by example. This was not to be a day of mourning, but of celebration. The kingdom needed to be unified. David needed to put aside his personal issues and begin the process of restoring the people's confidence in his ability to lead well. Absalom had undermined David's integrity and

caused the people to reject him as king. Now that he had his throne back, he needed to win back the hearts of the people. But David was too busy mourning.

And the opening lines of the next chapter reveal that David's mourning went on for some time.

> *Word soon reached Joab that the king was weeping and mourning for Absalom. As all the people heard of the king's deep grief for his son, the joy of that day's victory was turned into deep sadness. They crept back into the town that day as though they were ashamed and had deserted in battle. The king covered his face with his hands and kept on crying, "O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!"* – 2 Samuel 19:1-4 NLT

David's demeanor cast a pall over the nation. Rather than a spirit of celebration, there was a somberness and seriousness to the people. They were afraid to express joy because their king was despondent and depressed. And David's actions would not have expressed confidence in his troops. They would have naturally been upset that the king had turned their great victory into a national day of mourning. They had risked their lives, and many of their brothers had died, so that David might be restored to his throne. And all he could do was weep over the death of his rebellious son.

The prophet Isaiah goes on to describe how the king and the nation should have responded to the news of the victory over their enemy:

> *The watchmen shout and sing with joy,*
> *for before their very eyes*
> *they see the Lord returning to Jerusalem.*
> *Let the ruins of Jerusalem break into joyful song,*
> *for the Lord has comforted his people.*
> *He has redeemed Jerusalem.*
> *The Lord has demonstrated his holy power*
> *before the eyes of all the nations.*
> *All the ends of the earth will see*
> *the victory of our God.* – Isaiah 52:8-10 NLT

How easy it is for us to view life from our limited perspective and to selfishly place our desires over those of God. David had wanted to spare Absalom and somehow return things to the way they had been before. But God, in His justice, determined to punish Absalom for what he had done. He was deserving of death. Had David been able to spare him, Absalom would have proven to be a constant threat to his throne. God did what needed to be done. He graciously restored the kingdom to David. But rather than gratitude and joy, David returned God's undeserved favor with self-pity and an infectious spirit of sorrow.

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