

David, Absalom, and Forgiveness
Sally Cerny
August 9, 2015

Despite all my plans, once again that complex king, David, has won me over, and I can't resist exploring today's Old Testament reading with you. It's about Absalom's rebellion, of course, but as usual, it's David who intrigues me. So return with me now to those thrilling days of yesteryear: David, Joab, Absalom, and boots on the ground—at least most of the time.

Today's passage begins *after* David's third son, Absalom, has declared himself king and marched into Jerusalem, causing David and a relatively small band of followers to flee to the wilderness. Absalom has gone even beyond usurping David's kingship, grinding in the insult by laying publicly with the ten concubines David left in Jerusalem. Even so, David's command to his generals is "Deal gently with the young man, Absalom." *Why* is David so patient and forgiving? And *where* does this forbearance come from? Is it in some way central to our faith and a part of the Old Testament God that we seldom consider? This "young man, Absalom" is David's third son, NOT in line for the throne, and he appears to be attempting to grab David's kingship with utter contempt for David.

What do we know about Absalom? Physically, he's a heartthrob, a superstar . . . by Biblical accounts, the most handsome man in Jerusalem. Gorgeous, with thick, long, flowing locks, ingratiating manners, and *lots* of beguiling pomp and circumstance. He rides around in a chariot with 50 men running in front of him and does whatever he can to win the public attention and favor. Samuel gives him lots of focus! If Absalom lived here today, I think he would be posting a daily selfie on Facebook, and I confess that he crossed my mind more than once when we were watching the Presidential debates on Thursday. Yet somehow both David and the people of Jerusalem adore Absalom, and over time he grows to believe he can do no wrong.

With regard to his brothers, Absalom literally gets away with murder, specifically the murder of David's eldest son and Absalom's half-brother, Amnon, who was heir to the throne. From that moment on, David and Absalom play something of a love/hate, exile and repatriation game. In the end, Absalom gathered his supporters in Hebron, declared himself King of Israel, and began to march on David and Jerusalem.

The plot thickens, so let's move a little closer to the action! David knows that he is outnumbered by Absalom's forces and flees beyond the Jordan River, leaving behind in Jerusalem a few loyal, artful spies, the Ark of the Covenant, and 10 concubines to manage his household. It is these young women that Absalom purposely and publicly lies with on Jerusalem's rooftops. Meanwhile, following the advice of Hushai (who is secretly David's servant), Absalom does not chase after David immediately but waits in Jerusalem to martial and strengthen his own forces. Then he marches out, planning to attack and annihilate his father's troops. David, of course, now has time to strengthen his own army too, and this is where we encounter today's passage.

Despite Absalom's complete rejection and repudiation of his father, David, as he sends his generals forth to battle Absalom, charges them to "Deal gently with the young man, Absalom." As God forgave David after his egregious sins with Bathsheba and Uriah, so David seems hopeful to forgive Absalom after the battle. Amazing grace, indeed!

As you probably noticed, 2nd Samuel's depiction of the battle itself is pure Hollywood. Fought in the forest of Ephraim, it destroyed 20,000 men, and, if David held the field; surely the Lord held sway in the woods. Verse 8 summarizes, "The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword."

In Absalom's case, ironically it was precisely his gorgeous head of hair and beautiful face that was his downfall. Well, *not* completely his downfall . . . but at least what left him hanging, boots *off* the ground. To quote today's reading once again, "Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on," Then Joab, the same general who was charged by David to protect Absalom, was told of Joab's being held in the arms of the ancient oak, and he personally thrust 3 spears into Absalom's heart while our not-completely-fallen hero was still hanging in the tree. Joab's armor-bearers finished off the job.

And what about David himself? Twice, when he learned of the day's great victory from two separate messengers, he replied only, "How is it with the young man, Absalom?" and "Is it well with the young man, Absalom?" After learning of his death, the text concludes, "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!"

Now for some personal memories. When I first read this passage as a teenager, I thought David must be up to his old tricks, trying to *look* good. His anguish, I thought, could not be for real! Wouldn't he be glad to have had someone rid him of that meddlesome son (to steal a line from Becket)? But, NO, 1st Corinthians 14 had it right, and "When I was a child, I . . . thought as a child." Up until now, David had retained his distance and reason, referring to his son only and always as "the young man, Absalom." This *distance* from Absalom (who was 40 at the time) is the actual pretense. In the end, David drops the impersonal and laments for, "My son, my son Absalom, my son." Today I can understand David's anguish. Just as David was God's chosen servant, so Absalom, despite his insurrection, was still David's cherished son. We all have experienced how feelings can out-trump reason. David's grief was sincere, and he may well have felt he caused Absalom's rebellion through his own sinfulness. According to his prophet, Nathan, God's punishment to David for his adultery was not only the death of David and Bathsheba's child but also it was to be ongoing strife and dissension in the family. David may have believed that *he* caused this situation and should indeed have received God's punishment.

What I am awed by in this story, finally, is the sense of amazing grace and the power of forgiveness we've discussed several times this summer. Joab, in killing Absalom, was stuck in his anger as are the countless warring tribes who have battled each other through millennia. Let's treat the enemy even more savagely than he has treated us—let's get more than even! But David has broken the cycle here—even while he fights for his kingdom. He sees and feels love more strongly than anger, and I like to think that his actions are modeled by his own relationship with God. God forgave him his sins, and David is ready for forgiveness, not revenge.

There's another slightly earlier passage in 2nd Samuel 16 that strengthens my interpretation of David's actions. Here, David and his men are on the road from Jerusalem before the battle, still fleeing from Absalom. They are stoned and cursed by a sole man, Shimei, yet David orders his followers not to retaliate, to leave the man in peace. The passage quotes David as saying:

"My son, my own flesh and blood, is trying to kill me. How much more, then, this Benjamite! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. 12 It may be that the Lord will look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today."

And so, in fact, the Lord does. David returns to Jerusalem, to the Ark of the Covenant (it's still there!), and to his kingship. Absalom's flawless beauty and thick, flowing hair, his great blessing, turns out to be his final curse. Modern psychologists are studying the power of forgiveness not only for those who are forgiven but even more meaningfully for those who forgive, as I believe David would do here. Paul talks about the importance of forgiveness in his letter to the Ephesians today too, counseling for "forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." Even today, forgiveness falls like rain on our broken, parched souls, allowing us to heal and to grow, and, statistics suggest, even to live longer. It renews us and frees us to look forward in hope instead of back in anger. David grieves both for Absalom and for the split in his kingdom, but both David and it will be able to heal with God's continuing love. Absalom, caught by the tangles of his own self-absorption, is not so blessed.