

Followers of the Way

The Father's heart cry

Philip Quenby, 17-07-22

2 Samuel 18:1-17 and 2 Samuel 18:29-33

One of the many wonderful things about the Scriptures is their searing honesty about human beings and the human condition. The great heroes of the faith are shown warts and all, as flesh and blood people just like us, not as plaster saints or cardboard cut-outs. It means we can be confident that the life they led and the things they did aren't the preserve of a spiritual elite we can never match, but instead are within the reach of all of us by virtue of the empowering of the Holy Spirit. As Paul put it, "I can do all things through him who gives me strength." (Philippians 4:13). The great apostle to the Gentiles of course recognised that God's "power is made perfect in [our] weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9) and "we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." (2 Corinthians 4:7). But he was very clear in asserting, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power." (1 Corinthians 4:20). This power derives ultimately from our heavenly Father, mediated through Jesus and manifested in us by the Holy Spirit. Getting more of this power means (among other things) understanding and answering the heart cry of our heavenly Father.

In continuing our series on fatherhood, we'll be looking at an episode from the closing years of King David's reign. He's someone the Bible describes as "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14) and he performed many mighty deeds during his life. But he had a troubled background and often made a tremendous mess of things, too. If we want to talk about dysfunctional families, David's takes some beating. Here's a quick snapshot of some of the major events of his life:

Adult burdens were placed on his shoulders from the earliest age, as he was charged with caring for his father's flocks and protecting them from wild animals (1 Samuel 17:34-36).

He was misunderstood, insulted, belittled and falsely accused in front of others by his eldest brother Eliab (1 Samuel 17:28), and probably had to put up with similar behaviour at home.

Whilst "only a boy" (1 Samuel 17:42) he was caught up in war between the Israelites and the Philistines, bravely taking responsibility when every adult was afraid to do so by confronting and killing the formidable enemy champion, Goliath (1 Samuel 17:40-50).

Still just a young man, he was driven into exile and then hunted down by the Israelite king Saul, who wanted to kill him (1 Samuel 19-21 and 26).

During this time, when he was almost constantly on the run and knew little security, his wife Michal was forcibly taken from him by her father Saul and given to another man, with David powerless to do anything about it (1 Samuel 25:44).

He suffered severe illness (Psalm 38:3-10), had a child who died soon after birth (2 Samuel 12:13-19), a daughter who was raped by her own brother (2 Samuel 13:1-21), a son who was murdered (2 Samuel 13:23-33) and another – his beloved Absalom – who rebelled against him and was killed (2 Samuel 15 and 18).

He committed adultery and murder, leading to appalling guilt: 2 Samuel 11 and Psalm 51.

He experienced the disappointment of not being allowed by God to build a temple to the Lord in Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 22:7-8). At some level, he probably felt he'd failed in life.

Yet despite all this, he features in the great roll-call of faith in Hebrews 11:32, is among the ancestors of Jesus and is portrayed by many Old Testament writers as a Messianic forerunner: see for example Ezekiel 34:23-24, 37:24-25. David's warrior rule prefigures Jesus coming as a crowned warrior on a white horse at the head of His army of saints to subdue His enemies and usher in His Millennial reign on earth (Revelation 19:11-16), whilst his son Solomon's reign of "rest on every side" (1 Kings 5:3-4) prefigures Christ's everlasting rule of peace and justice that will follow the Millennium.

Though King David was a man with flaws and failings like all of us, this Millennial aspect means that looking at his life can help us grasp things about God, His ways and His kingdom. So, with all that in mind, let's set the scene for the passage we heard read today:

Absalom was David's third son, born when David was in a civil war against those who still supported the claims to the throne of Saul's descendants (2 Samuel 3:3). Absalom means "father of peace" and – just as most fathers want better for their children than they've had themselves – this was David's wish for Absalom: that he should experience peace. Sadly, it wasn't to be that way.

Absalom had his half-brother Amnon killed in revenge for Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13:28-29) and as a result was banished from court for several years before being reconciled with his father (2 Samuel 14:33).

Devious and manipulative (2 Samuel 15:2-5), on his return to Jerusalem Absalom started to undermine his father's rule and "stole the hearts of the men of Israel" (2 Samuel 15:6).

Absalom was a wonderfully attractive character, but proud and vain: "In all the kingdom there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom." (2 Samuel 14:25). He was susceptible to flattery, and people knew it.

Within four years of being welcomed back by his father (2 Samuel 15:7), Absalom's conspiracy (2 Samuel 15:10-12) became outright rebellion. Having gone to Hebron as a ruse, he returned to Jerusalem at the head of an army. David was forced to flee.

We pick up the action as David was preparing to turn and fight against his pursuing son. Reluctantly agreeing not to go into battle with his troops (2 Samuel 18:3-4), the king gave careful instructions to his top commanders: "Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake.' And all the troops heard the king giving orders concerning Absalom to each of the commanders." (2 Samuel 18:5).

The resulting battle went David's way and Absalom's vanity was his downfall: the hair he was so proud of got tangled in a tree, making him easy prey for the wily, ambitious and ruthless general, Joab. In contravention of David's orders, Absalom was killed. The king's lament on hearing the news is one of the most heart-rending passages of the Old Testament: "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).

It's right to pause there a moment to take in David's outpouring of emotion. There's no stiff upper lip, no attempt to hold things in until he's safely out of sight of the people standing around him. This was a spontaneous cry of grief uttered as "As he went" on his way "up to the room over the gateway and

wept.” (2 Samuel 18:33). David always wore his heart on his sleeve, as when he was despised by his wife Michal for making a spectacle of himself by leaping and dancing before the LORD as the Ark was brought back to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:16). How very human, how very honest, and how often we’ve seen similar scenes repeated down the centuries as parents have mourned the untimely deaths of their children. God greatly appreciates it when we’re open and truthful with him about what we think and feel. And, if David shows us the extent of the grief felt by a human father, how much greater must our heavenly Father’s feelings for us be.

So, let’s consider what this Messianic forerunner shows us about the heart of the Messiah Jesus (and therefore of our heavenly Father, since if we’ve seen Jesus, we’ve seen the Father: John 14:9).

David’s love for his son was steadfast and unchanging. Absalom was loved despite his character flaws, despite his sinful behaviour and even despite his rebellion and treachery. We’re all flawed, we’ve all sinned and in some measure we’ve all been rebellious and treacherous towards God. None of it quenches His great love for us.

Even though he was compelled to exile his son, “the spirit of the king longed to go to Absalom, for he was consoled concerning Amnon’s death” (2 Samuel 13:29) and “the king’s heart longed for Absalom” (2 Samuel 14:1). **A good father will always long for his child, come what may.** Our heavenly Father longs for us with a deep yearning. He wants to draw near to us.

David had no thought of revenge or retribution against Absalom for what he’d done. Instead, **his heart was for reconciliation.** Hence his order to “Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake.” (2 Samuel 18:5). God has made a way to reconcile mankind with Him and today He wants to make a greater reality of this reconciliation in our lives than ever before.

When messengers arrived from the battlefield, **David’s first thought wasn’t for how the fight had gone, but for his son:** “Is the young man Absalom safe?” (2 Samuel 18:29, 18:32). It isn’t that God doesn’t care about the things we do. And it isn’t that He disregards material needs or outward circumstances. But his primary concern is about *who* we are and *how* we are.

On learning of Absalom death, David in his agonising grief uttered **a father’s heart cry for his son:** “if only I had died instead of you” (2 Samuel 18:33). David’s heart cry is a pale reflection of the heart cry of God the Father. If this was how an imperfect human father wept over his son, just imagine how a perfect heavenly Father weeps when his children suffer or turn away.

Reflecting on David’s life helps us see how God’s Fatherly love for us is steadfast and unchanging, He longs deeply for us at all times, His desire is to be reconciled with us, His concern is first and foremost about us rather than the material things we often attach most importance to, and He hasn’t only expressed a wish He could die instead of us, He’s actually made a reality of it through the death of Jesus on the cross. If thinking about God as a heavenly Father seems too abstract to grasp properly, just remember David and Absalom and the heart cry that’s directed towards each one of us.

Five times in 2 Samuel 18:33 David exclaimed, “My son!” – five being the number of Grace. The LORD is a God of grace, and He wants to bestow His grace upon His beloved children. God’s grace means His goodness to those who deserve only punishment. Absalom deserved severest punishment, and if he’d been an ordinary citizen, that’s no doubt how David would have been minded to treat him. But usual considerations and the normal operations of justice were trumped by Absalom’s sonship. And just as it was with Absalom, so it is with us. Our sonship means God treats us in ways we don’t deserve.

Fully understanding the extraordinary love God has for us at a heart level, instead of it merely being an intellectual proposition we assent to, is a vital step in our walk of faith. But there's so much more than this that the LORD wants for us. Because sonship isn't an excuse to live in an extended period of babyhood, or to wallow in a time of teenage angst and rebellion against parental authority, but a call to step into a continual period of growth and into greater and greater degrees of maturity. It's about accessing all the riches God has made available to us in Christ, about truly dying to self and walking in the LORD's perfect will rather than merely what He allows.

Absalom's self-centredness and immaturity led him to misunderstand sonship. He viewed it through a lens of selfish entitlement rather than showing a mature acceptance of responsibility that was rooted in the security of a healthy relationship with his father. And in doing so, he harmed himself. He sought in his own strength – through sin and rebellion, which the Bible says is akin to witchcraft (1 Samuel 15:23) – what might have been his for the asking if he'd simply waited patiently. For all we know, he rather than Solomon might have succeeded David as king had he acted differently. Instead, he fell into Satan's trap, symbolised by the entanglement that put him at the mercy of a man who wished him harm, being snared by his own weakness. And the result of all this was an ignominious end to a life of bright promise – his body was thrown "into a big pit" (2 Samuel 18:17), a picture of hell – instead of him being brought by God into the glorious future he could and should have had. No wonder David wept. And no wonder God weeps over everyone who chooses a similar path.

By the mercy and grace of God, "everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved (Romans 10:13, quoting Joel 2:32). But that's just the start of our adventure of faith, not the end of it. We're to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12), cooperating and co-labouring with God so as to make a greater and greater reality of our sonship. I believe the heart cry of our heavenly Father for each one of us today is:

To bring us to a place of understanding we're not orphans left to fend for ourselves as best we can in this fallen world, with nothing for it but to try and pull ourselves up by the bootstraps through our own efforts. This independent reliance on self cripples us, harms us and separates us from all our heavenly Father has for us.

Instead, God's longing is for us to discover that the way to access His power and provision is for us to die to the life of self and to allow Him complete access and control in every area of our life. In other words, to let Him be the source from which we live. Then all His riches and all His resources will be available to us, as He always intended.

This is what Paul calls putting on a "new self" (Ephesians 4:24, Colossians 3:10) to replace the "old self" (Romans 6:6, Ephesians 4:22, Colossians 3:9), which represents the life of trying to do things our own way and in our own strength. This new self is how we become fully sons, and so lay hold of wholeness, completeness and union with God Himself.

The father in the parable of Prodigal Son told his oldest boy that "everything I have is yours." (Luke 15:31). The same goes for us. We just have to put ourselves in a position to recognise it and to take hold of it.

Which brings us back to where we started: the doings of the great heroes of the faith from ages past aren't beyond us. The same Holy Spirit that was in them is in us, and Jesus said later generations would do "greater things than these [works He performed]." (John 14:12). It's time for true sons to come into their own. Jesus says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock." (Revelation 3:20). If there's any

part of our life that we haven't allowed Him to enter yet, let now be the moment we open ourselves fully to Him. When we give Jesus the pass that reads: Access all areas, then we'll be sons indeed. Amen.