



OVERRUN BY A SON'S RAGE

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

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2 Samuel 13:23-39
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In our last study in the life of King David of Israel, we found David, who once had used others to satisfy his lusts, being victimized in the same way by his own son. The reflection of his son's crime not only returned to the king, it magnified his own sin. Amnon's offense grew both in the act and its object, as sin escalated from quick and easy adultery to premeditated rape. The victim of the first crime was the wife of an intimate friend; in this latest incident, the victim is a sister.

The consequences of this one act within the royal family of Israel were catastrophic. As we pick up the story once more, two years have passed since David's eldest son, Amnon, raped his half-sister, Tamar, two years during which David has sat idle, sealed shut in his own silent rage. Compromised by his past, David is unable to discipline his son and bring about restitution for his daughter. Two years with no action taken, no inquiries sought, and no justice gained. The royal court is enveloped in a shroud of shame, masking a sea of seething emotions.

How often did David look upon Tamar's face during those two years? How can a father look upon a daughter who had sought his help, only to be turned away? How did David greet Tamar when she attended the royal feasts? Was she kept conveniently out of sight in the safe seclusion of Absalom's home, protected from public scrutiny and the embarrassment of her father? And what kind of a relationship did the king now enjoy with Amnon, that lustful son who had imitated and exceeded David's own sin? Did David get angry at him in public, or was every rebuke and angry stroke he wanted to fling at his son cut off at the throat by the memories of his own past indiscretions? And what of Absalom, who had excommunicated his brother in a rage of silence? How did he engage his brother at family feasts? Did rage continue to burn in his silent eyes, or did he feign politeness, adopting the severe coolness that hatred brings?

Such was life in the royal court, where even the simplest of transactions could not be carried out without engaging the deepest emotions. David could do nothing to change matters, but two years had pushed Absalom over the edge. He would not allow his father's passive silence to continue. It was time to act, and that is what he will do, with a well conceived plot of bloody revenge.

This then is the story of father against son, and their contrasting roles. In the first act, the key figure is Absa-

lom: "He has plans, he insists, and he acts." In the second act, it is David who is plagued in passivity: "He is doomed to wait, to talk, and to mourn."¹ Which of these two men, David or Absalom, would hold the key to the future of the nation Israel?

I. Absalom, Master of Revenge (13:23-29)

(a) Putting Father in the Uncomfortable Corner (13:23-27)

Now it came about after two full years that Absalom had sheepshearers in Baal-hazor, which is near Ephraim; and Absalom invited all the king's sons. And Absalom came to the king and said, "Behold now, your servant has sheepshearers; please let the king and his servants go with your servant." But the king said to Absalom, "No, my son, we should not all go, lest we be burdensome to you." Although he urged him, he would not go, but blessed him. 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 when Absalom urged him, he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him. (NASB)

If Amnon had used his father as an accomplice for rape, then Absalom would respond by using him as an accomplice in his brother's murder. If Amnon's actions were the result of the uncontrolled passions of the moment, Absalom would counter with actions methodically plotted out over two years. If Amnon was aided by Jonadab in secret, Absalom would use his assistance publicly. Absalom has worked long and hard to pick out the exact time and place of his revenge. He trusts that two years would give him the cover of time; and the proposed location, about twenty miles to the north of Jerusalem, enough distance to make good his escape. The occasion for his plot is a sheepshearing festival, well known in Israel as an occasion rich in festivities.

So it is time for Absalom to approach his father. He says to him, "Your servant has sheepshearer; please let the king and his servants go with your servant." He is making a request for the king and the whole court to attend the festival. Absalom knows he is asking far too much from his father; his request is purposely calculated to elicit a negative response. David responds politely that he should not go lest he be too big a burden to his son. Absalom, unsatisfied, presses the issue with strong urgings,² but David does not yield. He imparts his blessing, hoping to end the matter. But Absalom has

succeeded in placing his father in the uncomfortable position of twice saying “no” to his handsome son.

Absalom counters with another request, this time mentioning Amnon by name. This seems risky, putting his brother’s name right out in the open. Wouldn’t this arouse suspicion? But, in a bold move, Absalom does this to give the appearance that he has nothing to hide. This time, however, David’s suspicions are aroused. “Why should he go with you?” he asks. David’s third denial comes with less force. Following Absalom’s repeated, forceful urgings, the king buckles. He can be besieged only for so long before he weakly capitulates. What Absalom did was to successfully drive “his father into the uncomfortable corner of having to say no.”³ David cannot bear the thought of disappointing his son a fourth time, so he compromises. But, to alleviate his fears, he dispatches all of his sons to the festival.

So in this first scene, David is no match for his determined son.

At the festival, Absalom has his young servants do the dirty work for him.

(b) Absalom a Commanding Leader Over His Servants (13:28-29)

And Absalom commanded his servants, saying, “See now, when Amnon’s heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, ‘Strike Amnon,’ then put him to death. Do not fear; have not I myself commanded you? Be courageous and be valiant.” And the servants of Absalom did to Amnon just as Absalom had commanded. Then all the king’s sons arose and each mounted his mule and fled.

Absalom knows he will not be able to get near his brother at the festival, so he engages a group of young servants, thereby revealing his control and influence over them as he plots Amnon’s death. The whole plan is designed to vindicate his sister Tamar’s speech following her brutal rape by her brother. Tamar had warned Amnon that if he gave in to his sensual pleasures, he would be considered as one of the fools of Israel. The word fool (*nabal*) is reminiscent of the Nabal story and his subsequent demise, after his heart was “merry with wine” (1 Sam 25:36-37). Absalom reasons: “Let this sensual brother of mine have his wine, and when it has consumed him, and he has lost his senses and the ability to react quickly, strike him dead!” His timing assures the servants that they are in no danger of counter-attack.

But such a treasonable act demands great courage, so Absalom raises the stakes, commanding his servants with the language of holy war, with himself as the new commander in chief. The servants, mere boys, are instantly transformed into elite military troops on a secret mission for the new kingdom. They pull it off uncontested, without so much as a struggle. The event is so understated that it paints this war strategist, Absalom, as one who occupies a high position of authority in Israel. By contrast, all the other king’s sons are forced to

flee on their mounts. Once symbols of royal status, the mules now carry them away into exile, as refugees. What an ironic turn of events, all which transpire in the twinkling of an eye.⁴

Absalom has proven to be more shrewd than his father David, and more powerful than his brother Amnon. The king’s eldest son, his successor, is dead; Tamar is avenged; and the last obstacle to the throne eliminated. With powerful force, the text presses the reader with the question: “Who shall be the next king in Israel?”

The second act focuses on David and the effect of these events upon his soul.

II. David, Ripped In Mourning (13:30-39)

(a) The First Report of Death (13:30-31)

Now it was while they were on the way that the report came to David, saying, “Absalom has struck down all the king’s sons, and not one of them is left.” Then the king arose, tore his clothes and lay on the ground; and all his servants were standing by with clothes torn.

The rumor which spreads from Baal-Hazor to Jerusalem travels even faster than the refugees. Is this part of Absalom’s perfect organization? Did he use Jonadab as Amnon had done? “*Absalom has struck down all the king’s sons, and not one of them is left.*” The false report hits David like a punch to the stomach. The king rises and shreds his robe, showing as much grief as Tamar felt when she rended her royal garment following her rape. The heartrending sound of David tearing his robe multiplies and moves through the palace like a tidal wave of grief resonating off the walls.

David finally is captured by the grief that he denied his daughter, the grief that he refused Bathsheba, and the grief that he glazed over in the death of Uriah. Grief has seized him by the throat; he is speechless with horror. He cannot begin to comprehend the thought that his entire family, save one, has been annihilated, while even that one had disqualified himself from ruling. This was a disaster of cosmic dimensions. Had the Davidic covenant been completely annihilated? Speechless with horror, David falls to the ground and grasps the earth, hoping to lay hold of heaven.

I am reading the memoirs of Elie Wiesel, the survivor of the Nazi terror. In one paragraph he describes his feelings as a thirteen-year-old about to be deported to the concentration camp. Perhaps this is how David felt as he tried to come to grips with the news of the death of his entire family:

We arrived at the station, where the cattle cars were waiting...My very last resistance broken, I let myself be pulled, pushed, and kicked, like a deaf and mute sleepwalker. I could see everything, grasp it and register it, but only later would I try to put in order all the sensations and all the memories. How stunned I was, for example, to discover another time outside

time, a universe parallel to this one, a creation within Creation, with its own laws, customs, structures, and language. In this universe some men existed only to kill and others only to die. And the system functioned with exemplary efficiency: tormentors tormented and crushed their prey, torturers tortured human beings whom they met for the first time, slaughterers slaughtered their victims without so much as a glance, flames rose to heaven and nothing ever jammed the mechanism. It was as if it all unfolded according to a plan decreed from the beginning of time.⁵

But now a second report reaches David.

(b) The Second Report of Death (13:32-33)

And Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David's brother, responded, "Do not let my lord suppose they have put to death all the young men, the king's sons, for Amnon alone is dead; because by the intent of Absalom this has been determined since the day that he violated his sister Tamar. Now therefore, do not let my lord the king take the report to heart, namely, 'all the king's sons are dead,' for only Amnon is dead."

Onto the stage once more comes Jonadab. The one who plotted with Amnon to use his father to feed Amnon's lust, now appears on the stage as an ironic comforter, a bearer of good news to David. The narrator gives a clue that Jonadab may have been Absalom's instrument for the well-timed rumor that had devastated the king. Jonadab's label, "son of Shimeah," is a strong verbal echo to verse 30: "the report came to David" (the words are the same in the Hebrew). Perhaps this is a subtle clue in the well-crafted art of the narrator that Jonadab has been in the mix again, this time as a secret accomplice to Absalom's revenge. What a conniver! In one instance, he feeds the lust of Amnon, in another, he plots Absalom's revenge.

Jonadab's words are venomously crafted to sting with David with harsh invective from his past: "Do not suppose all the sons are dead, only Amnon is dead." This is followed with the most painful of lines: "Now therefore, do not let my lord the king take the report to heart, namely 'all the king's sons are dead,' for only Amnon is dead." In Uriah's case, the blow was lessened. Not only were many killed, but Uriah, David's servant, was killed also, so the death of the one lessened the grief over the deaths of the many. In this instance, the many spared will lessen the blow of the death of the one. Though the report may lessen David's pain, the words are designed to pour salt on his wounds: "Only one son, Amnon, is dead. It's just a little family tiff. Don't take the report to heart."

This new report is confirmed by what the watchman sees on the horizon.

(c) The Third Report of Death (13:34-36)

Now Absalom had fled. And the young man who

was the watchman raised 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; according to your servant's word, so it happened." And it came about as soon as he had finished speaking, that behold, the king's sons came and lifted their voices and wept; and also the king and all his servants wept very bitterly.

The young watchman looks out over the city wall to the northwest of Jerusalem and sees the king's sons racing home like a pack of refugees. Jonadab again uses the scene to elevate his own ego and status. What a good servant he has been in the whole affair! Shrewd, cunning, propitious Jonadab could be counted on.

David is traumatized. Three times he has had to endure hearing the details of the death of his son. Each time, the gaping wound is reopened. The first time he heard the report, it was enflamed rumor; the second time, the truth was imparted by Jonadab, and confirmed by what David saw; now finally, he has to hear it a third time, from those closest to the event and to the king himself—his own sons. Their weeping rings through the palace like the shophar of the Jews at the festival. Loud and all-consuming, it beckons everyone and everything to the center of David's sorrow.

And what of Absalom? Verse 37:

Now Absalom fled and went to Talmi the son of Ammihud, the king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son every day. So Absalom had fled and gone to Geshur, and was there three years. And King David longed to go out to Absalom; for he was comforted (or grieved) concerning Amnon, since he was dead. (13:37-39)

In the meantime, Absalom has fled north, seeking safety in the camp of the king of Geshur, a country east of the Jordan, in Syria. (Talmi, the king of Geshur, was the father of Maacah, Absalom's mother, 2 Sam 3:3.) This final card in Absalom's hand prevents David from going out after him for three years.

During those three years, David "mourned for his son every day," according to the text. The question is, which son was he mourning? The text is ambiguous. One son is dead, another banished to permanent exile. "The denseness of the king's loss is so thick he cannot sort it out."⁶

David's final emotion, revealed in verse 39, is ambiguous as well. Most of our English translations render this verse in this way:

David longed to go out [i.e. in reconciliation] to Absalom for he was comforted (*nacham*) concerning Amnon, since he was dead.

I think it would be better translated as:

David longed to go out [i.e. in a military operation] to Absalom for he was grieved (*nacham*) concerning

Amnon, since he was dead.

This second translation better fits the story which follows. David is so enraged at Absalom he wants to hunt him down and kill him. But the narrator's ambiguity is deliberate. It shows that these tragic events have left David's soul tossing and turning in a sea of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, the king is engulfed with waves of unrelenting sorrow that crash over him with power and force, eliciting tears to awaken lost love in his soul. But on the other hand, the waves recede, pulled back by an undertow of rage. The rage is manifest later in the story when David is backed into a corner and coerced into bringing Absalom home to Jerusalem. But even then, he refuses to allow him to see his face. The son lives in the city of the king, but he is not permitted to see the king's face.

There is a lot of anger in these actions by David. Every step that Absalom takes and every ounce of the air he breathes in Jerusalem is a reminder of his father's separation and condemnation. But in the end, when Absalom's life is finally on the line, the deep longings of lost love resurface in the midst of battle. When we come to that, we will behold a father's nervous demeanor as he is obsessed with the safety of his son. At Absalom's death, we hear a father's final agonized cry: "O my son, Absalom, my son, my son, would I have died instead of you." It is a cry of all-consuming ache for love lost between a father and son. In the end, David's love is totally absent of rage.

The lesson for David is clear. He who once abused, who pretended to see and be merciless, is now abused, by sons, manipulated for their crimes. "His ego cannot

protect him against this with an armor of indifference and mock-strength. It is destroyed, and a weak, mourning David *patiens* remains."⁷

I have come to the conclusion that sorrow is a very good thing, especially later in life. Sorrow transforms us. It recreates our hard hearts and makes them into fathers' hearts, hearts that know how to be tender, how to weep and mourn and love. David's embrace of this deep and all consuming sorrow is the very thing that will reinstate him in his rightful place as father of his family and King of Israel forever. After all, whose prayers do you read at night, David's or Absalom's?

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1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 111. I have heavily depended upon Fokkelman for many of my insights into the story line.

2. The verb "*paratz*" (to urge) is a strong military term meaning "to break or burst through." It is used of breaking through a breach in a city wall, or of a baby bursting out of the womb. The last time the verb was used in this sense in Samuel, was when Saul made a vow not to eat, but his will was broken by the strong urgings of the witch's servants (1 Sam 28:23), when she and her servants prevailed upon Saul.

3. Fokkelmann, *King David*, 115.

4. Fokkelmann, *King David*, 117.

5. Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs*, 78-79.

6. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 291.

7. Fokkelmann, *King David*, 159.