

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Mr. Anthony Brett

## Some trees of the Bible: The Tree of Death

The story of Absalom's death is one of the stranger stories in the Bible. King David, Israel's greatest king, as was often the case then, had many children, from several different wives and Absalom was definitely one of his favourites. He was a good looking man who had obtained favour with the people of Israel through flattery, but Absalom was also a murderer and a proud man who eventually rebelled against his father David.

I will now read to you the story of Absalom's capture and death from 2 Samuel 18:1-18. "And David numbered the people who were with him, and set captains of thousands and captains of hundreds over them. Then David sent out one third of the people under the hand of Joab, one third under the hand of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the hand of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the people, 'I also will surely go out with you myself.' But the people answered, 'You shall not go out! For if we flee away, they will not care about us; nor if half of us die, will they care about us. But you *are* worth ten thousand of us now. For you are now more help to us in the city.' Then the king said to them, 'Whatever seems best to you I will do.' So the king stood beside the gate, and all the people went out by hundreds and by thousands. Now the king had commanded Joab, Abishai, and Ittai, saying, 'Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.' And all the people heard when the king gave all the captains orders concerning Absalom. So the people went out into the field of battle against Israel. And the battle was in the woods of Ephraim. The people of Israel were overthrown there before the servants of David, and a great slaughter of twenty thousand took place there that day. For the battle there was scattered over the face of the whole countryside, and the woods devoured more people that day than the sword devoured. Then Absalom met the servants of David. Absalom rode on a mule. The mule went under the thick boughs of a great terebinth tree, and his head caught in the terebinth; so he was left hanging between heaven and earth. And the mule which was under him went on. Now a certain man saw it and told Joab, and said, 'I just saw Absalom hanging in a terebinth tree!' So Joab said to the man who told him, 'You just saw him! And why did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have given you ten shekels of silver and a belt.' But the man said to Joab, 'Though I were to receive a thousand shekels of silver in my hand, I would not raise my hand against the king's son. For in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "Beware lest anyone touch the young man Absalom!" Otherwise I would have dealt falsely against my own life. For there is nothing hidden from the king, and you yourself would have set yourself against me.' Then Joab said, 'I cannot linger with you.' And he took three spears in his hand and thrust them through Absalom's heart, while he was still alive in the midst of the terebinth tree. And ten young men who bore Joab's armour surrounded Absalom, and struck and killed him. So Joab blew the trumpet, and the people returned from pursuing Israel. For Joab held back the people. And they took Absalom and cast him into a large pit in the woods, and laid a very large heap of stones over him. Then all Israel fled everyone to his tent. Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up a pillar for himself, which 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 to this day it is called Absalom's Monument." 2 Samuel 18:1-18.

The verses we have just read together, 2 Samuel 18:1-18, relate the rather gory end to the life of Absalom, one of King David's many sons. Saul, who had been the people's favourite previously had started life with some degree of promise but had quickly failed and disobeyed God. Consequently God had rejected Saul as king and David was anointed to reign over Israel instead. David was justifiably a popular and brave leader of the nation of Israel even before he became king. Who has not heard the famous story of his victory over the giant! (see 1 Samuel 17:1-58) But popularity brought problems and having been cheated out of his first wife Michal (1 Samuel 25:44), David unfortunately then took several wives, among them Ahinoam the Jezreelitess (1 Samuel 25:43), Abigail (1 Samuel 25:43), Haggith, Abital, Eglah (2 Samuel 3:5) and Maacah who was the daughter of Talmai king of Geshur. It was Maacah who gave birth to Absalom (2 Samuel 3:3). Absalom was the third eldest son of David.

This is almost certainly when the seed was sown that would ultimately lead to the disaster that we have read about. I have already commented that David was a much loved and highly respected leader of the nation of Israel, but it would seem to be true that he failed in his family life. It was common practice then for powerful men to have as many wives as they wanted and could afford! But this wasn't the way God intended it should be. At the very beginning, before sin entered this world (see Genesis 3:1-7) God had provided just one wife for Adam (Genesis 2:18-25). Eve was Adam's "help meet" Genesis 2:18. Equal to Adam and the complement of him. Together they could express and enjoy the love that God had placed in their hearts for each other. God was setting out a pattern that would endure throughout history, and supremely was a picture of Christ's love for His bride, the church (see Revelation 21:2, 9).

It should have been an exclusive relationship, one man and one woman, to be together and together raise and care for the children that God would bless them with. Sadly whenever this order is broken, in the Old Testament or throughout history, the seed is sown for tension and failure, often of quite a catastrophic nature. Take for example the story of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham was married to a beautiful woman (Genesis 11:29), he seemed to have tremendous affection for her and together they had been promised by God the blessing of many offspring (Genesis 12:1-9). Yet when their faith in God's promise was tested they failed. Abraham had a sexual relationship with Sarah's handmaid which resulted in the birth of Ishmael (Genesis 16:1-15), a rival for the true heir, Isaac that God had promised Abraham and Sarah (see Genesis 17:1-22, Genesis 21:1-7). So much heartache has resulted down the centuries as a consequence of this conflict between Ishmael and Isaac, between Arab and Jew.

We do not read of Absalom again until he is a grown man who had a sister, Tamar, whom the Bible describes as "lovely", 2 Samuel 13:1. Unfortunately Absalom's half brother, Amnon, lusted after her (2 Samuel 13:2), and through the advice of a scheming friend called Jonadab (2 Samuel 13:3), so arranged circumstances that Amnon had opportunity to rape Tamar (2 Samuel 13:3-14). Whatever feelings Amnon had for Tamar before the rape were now replaced by bitter hatred (2 Samuel 13:15). To have married her would, in the culture of the day, have spared Tamar some degree of shame. Instead she was driven out of the presence of the man who had so shamefully treated her and the door was bolted behind her (2 Samuel 13:17). The story continues with Absalom saying to his distraught sister, "'Has Amnon your brother been with you? But now hold your peace, my sister. He is your brother; do not take this thing to heart.' So Tamar remained desolate in her brother Absalom's house." 2 Samuel 13:20. Absalom's heartless advice to his sister is unfortunately matched by King David's inaction. The Scripture records that David was very angry (2 Samuel 13:21), but there is no evidence that he did anything further about the matter, even though the Bible laid out very clearly the price that Amnon should have paid for his action.

If David took no action to punish his erring son, Amnon, Absalom had no intention of leaving the matter alone. A good two full years later, following careful planning, Absalom arranges a family get-together (2 Samuel 13:23), gets his half brother Amnon drunk and arranges for his servants to kill him (2 Samuel 13:24-29). Soon news of the murder is brought to David but in an exaggerated version. "Absalom has killed all the king's sons, and not one of them is left!" 2 Samuel 13:30. David is devastated by the report, tears his clothes and lies mourning on the ground. Then Jonadab, who was the friend who had advised Absalom on the plan to rape Tamar, intervenes and speaks to King David saying, "Let not my lord suppose they have killed all the young men, the king's sons, for only Amnon is dead. For by the command of Absalom this has been determined from the day that he forced his sister Tamar. Now therefore, let not my lord the king take the thing to his heart, to think that all the king's sons are dead. For only Amnon is dead." 2 Samuel 13:32-33.

What a can of worms! "Don't take it to heart" These were the words that Absalom spoke to his sister, Tamar, after she had been raped! Now Jonadab who had helped Amnon in his plan to seduce and rape Tamar, tells King David, "Don't take it to heart!" Only one of your sons is dead! Poor David!! What had happened to this great king to bring so much trouble into his family? I'm afraid he was reaping what he had sown (see Galatians 6:7). Earlier, David had desired a woman that he had seen bathing (2 Samuel 11:1-5). As king he had taken what he wanted, and then fearing the incident would become public knowledge, he had deliberately allowed the woman's husband to be killed in battle (2 Samuel 11:6-17). David was guilty of adultery and murder, and although David had very genuinely repented and, in turn (2 Samuel 12:13), God had forgiven him, David had sown a harvest that he and his family would reap for years to come (see 2 Samuel 12:15-31).

It is often the case that whilst we can repent of our folly, and be forgiven, we may also have to live with the consequences of our actions for a long while. Remarkably, however, God will give grace and support to His children even in these circumstances!

David had failed to act in the matter of Amnon raping Tamar. Maybe he felt he was morally in no position to do so! But he was the king and he should have upheld the law and defended this woman. He didn't do so. The evil had obviously festered in Absalom's heart and now Absalom had taken the law into his own hands and killed Amnon, his half brother. It was certain, however, that Absalom could not remain in the country. "So Absalom fled and went to Geshur, and was there three years. And King David longed to go to Absalom." 2 Samuel 13:38-39. It is also recorded that "David mourned for his son every day." 2 Samuel 13:37 - apparently a reference to Absalom rather than Amnon.

It is really difficult to find much good in the story of Absalom! There is a father's favouritism, sibling rivalry, incest, rape, murder, rebellion and the attempted overthrow of God's chosen king! And whilst it is true to say that some of the blame must lay with David, his father, for failing to act as a father should, Absalom himself ultimately must take full responsibility for his own actions. He has taken his revenge on the man who had raped his sister but now Absalom finds himself in exile. David, however, dearly loves his son and wants to go to him, but cannot be seen to condone what Absalom has done. Joab, a close advisor and brave companion of David over many years, is aware of David's

feelings and makes plans for Absalom's return (2 Samuel 14:1-24). More devious scheming surrounding Absalom! No good can come of this.

In 2 Samuel 14 we read the story of how Joab devised a plan to get Absalom back to Jerusalem. Joab obtained the help of a "wise woman" from Tekoah, and coached her in the story she should tell David. "Joab said, 'Please pretend to be a mourner, and put on mourning apparel; do not anoint yourself with oil, but act like a woman who has been mourning a long time for the dead. Go to the king and speak to him in this manner.' So Joab put the words in her mouth. And when the woman of Tekoa spoke to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and prostrated herself, and said, 'Help, O king!' Then the king said to her, 'What troubles you?' And she answered, 'Indeed I am a widow, my husband is dead. Now your maidservant had two sons; and the two fought with each other in the field, and there was no one to part them, but the one struck the other and killed him. And now the whole family has risen up against your maidservant, and they said, "Deliver him who struck his brother, that we may execute him for the life of his brother whom he killed; and we will destroy the heir also." So they would extinguish my ember that is left, and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the earth.'" 2 Samuel 14:2-7.

For the second time in David's life he found himself listening to what was essentially a parable (see 2 Samuel 12:1-4). David was able to see the right course of action to take, and advised accordingly. What he didn't at first realise was that the parable was directed to himself! Now the wise woman presses home her advantage and says, "Why then have you schemed such a thing against the people of God? For the king speaks this thing as one who is guilty, in that the king does not bring his banished one home again. For we will surely die and become like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. Yet God does not take away a life; but He devises means, so that His banished ones are not expelled from Him." 2 Samuel 14:13-14.

David now realises that the message is for himself and he also suspects that it is Joab who is behind the scheme. David rules that Absalom is to be allowed to return to Jerusalem. "He said, 'Let him return to his own house, but do not let him see my face.' So Absalom returned to his own house, but did not see the king's face." 2 Samuel 14:24.

Absalom is back in Jerusalem but effectively under house arrest. Nor is he reconciled with his father properly. What a contrast to the pardon we receive from God our Father! We must confess that we have sinned, and then God righteously forgives us (see 1 John 1:9), and we are accepted into God's full favour because of the person and work of the Lord Jesus. We couldn't be nearer or dearer to God! There is no record of Absalom confessing his wrong-doings, and consequently there is no possibility of a change in his heart or character.

Next in the life story of Absalom is a passage that describes his remarkable vanity! He was widely recognised as a very handsome man, but he was also incredibly proud! "Now in all Israel there was no one who was praised as much as Absalom for his good looks. 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 - at the end of every year he cut it because it was heavy on him - when he cut it, he weighed the hair of his head at two hundred shekels according to the king's standard." 2 Samuel 14:25-26. Here is a man who seems to think the entire world revolves about himself! He lived two years in Jerusalem but became discontented and went to extraordinary lengths to get Joab to come and talk with him. Absalom even went as far as to set fire to Joab's harvest.

It had the desired effect! Joab came to see Absalom (2 Samuel 14:31-32), who complained to him about his situation and Joab arranged for Absalom to see his father David in the palace. When he got there Absalom prostrated himself before his father who in turn received and kissed him (2 Samuel 14:33). Absalom had again got what he wanted! If David thought things would now be better for his family he was bitterly disappointed. Absalom used his new freedom and his good looks to win over the nation of Israel with flattery and deceit. He would meet all those who had come to petition the king, get them to tell him their one-sided story and say how, if only he were in charge, he would sort out their grievances. He was a liar! The only person Absalom thought about was himself and he even pretended to have made a vow to God to furnish himself with the opportunity to openly rebel against his father.

Now comes what must be one of the saddest periods in David's life. David was a great king and warrior who had served God and his people faithfully. Yes, he had made some very serious mistakes and now was having to face up to the consequences of those actions. But his true character shines through. David was still a shepherd at heart and he would rather suffer than allow his people to suffer. Rather than fight against Absalom in Jerusalem and cause much loss of life, he leaves the city and goes into exile. And now we are back to the story I read at the beginning (2 Samuel 18:1-8). We have seen the history of Absalom that led up to this sorry and tragic finale. Whilst Absalom had convinced many of his right to be king, David still had a large and loyal following with battle hardened soldiers on his side. Led by Joab they set out after Absalom, forcing him to flee into the huge woods in the hope of escaping with his life.

How ironic that it was possibly Absalom's hair that brought about his ultimate downfall. That hair that he took so much pride in, that he had weighed each year. As he was fleeing, Absalom's head caught in the branches of a tree. His animal ran on without him and Absalom was left dangling in the air! It was to be his tree of death! In spite of the very

clear instructions that David has issued to his captains, Joab, as soon as he heard of Absalom's plight took some young soldiers with him, thrusts three darts through Absalom's heart and then the soldiers finish him off. "And they took Absalom and cast him into a large pit in the woods, and laid a very large heap of stones over him." 2 Samuel 18:17 The Holy Spirit adds at this point, "Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up a pillar for himself, which 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 to this day it is called Absalom's Monument." 2 Samuel 18:18. What a sorry legacy to leave behind you!

You cannot but help contrast this story with another well loved story in the New Testament, an event that one poet has called the "Centre of two eternities" Jesus, a man who rather than striving to obtain what was rightfully His, laid aside all His rights, humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross (see Philippians 2:8). What a legacy He has left us! Jesus died instead of us, was raised from the dead for our justification and is alive today at the right hand of God (see Romans 8:34). Today He offers to us forgiveness, companionship and eternal blessings.

David lamented the death of his wayward son, Absalom. He even wished he could have died in his place (see 2 Samuel 18:33). The wonder of the Christian Gospel is that what David could not do, God has, in fact, done for us, His wayward children. In the person of His Son, Jesus, He died for us at Calvary.

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