**Absalom killed and David grieves** 16/7/23 dkm

Read: 2Samuel 18, 2Samuel 19:1-8

Text: 2Samuel 18:1-19:8

Psalms: 100old, 94:17-23, 55:16-23, 72old

When David’s son, Absalom, led a *coup d’etat* and marched on the capital, Jerusalem, David fled the city, so there was no bloodshed; it was a bloodless coup. But David was not without his supporters. He had a mercenary force of six hundred Gittites, and Joab, his army commander with him. In the sovereign purposes of God, Ahithophel’s ‘good advice’ to Absalom was rejected, allowing David to escape to the city of Mahanaim, and resulting in Ahithophel committing suicide. Absalom believed his coup was successful, but David, with his supporters and warriors, posed a threat to him establishing himself as king. So Absalom put Amasa, Joab’s cousin, in charge of his army and went off the deal with David.

Civil war in Israel was inevitable. Most wars have winners but not a civil war, especially not one between relatives, and especially not one between father and son. Yet even in this tragic situation brought about by sinful men, the Lord overrules for his sovereign purposes. The Lord punishes wicked and rebellious men who refuse to repent, sometimes cutting short their earthly life we have already seen a betrayer committing suicide. Today we will see a rebellious son killed in battle.

God gave commands through Moses, commands that carry consequences when not obeyed. He who strikes his father or mother, or even curses his father or mother, shall surely be put to death (Exod 21:15, 17). In Israel judicial execution was by stoning; Absalom ended up under a huge pile of stones! Adultery also carried the death penalty, but David repented and, in the Lord’s mercy, escaped this penalty, but he did not escape other consequences of his sin. His infant son died when struck by the Lord (12:14) and his eldest son died when struck by his brother Absalom. David, as king, failed to execute justice, probably because of a guilty conscience. We see his guilty conscience come to the fore again in the context of this civil war in Israel. Let us look at the account of this civil war under four subheadings: ‘Defeat of Absalom and his rebels’, ‘Death of Absalom’, ‘Death of Absalom reported’, and, ‘David’s grief and guilt’.

**1. Defeat of Absalom and his rebels**

David and his servants/warriors, along with their families, fled to the city of Mahanaim in Gilead. They were exhausted and hungry but a rich man called Barzillai kindly supplied them with bedding, utensils and plenty of food. By the time Absalom arrived with his ‘citizen’s army’, David had organised his men into three units, one led by the seasoned fighter Joab, another by his brother Abishai, and a third led by Ittai the Gittite, a loyal leader of six hundred mercenaries from Gath (18:2, cf. 15:18,19). There is no record of Absalom, or even Amasa, his army commander, having been involved in a battle before this time.

David was a seasoned military leader and he wanted to lead his well-organised forces into battle against Absalom and all the Israelites who had joined his rebellion. But the people advised David to stay in the city. David was getting old, but they wanted him kept out of this battle because of conflicted feelings towards his son. We might also remember the ‘good advice’ of Ahithophel, which was to target David, take him out, and see all the people come over to the rebels. For this reason they said to David, ‘You are worth ten thousand of us now’ (18:3). David had fought the Philistine giant, Goliath, and won, but fighting his own son would be a different matter. We find no reference to prayer or seeking the will of God in this story. David agreed to the people’s demand to stay in the city while his men went to battle. He lived to regret the last time he stayed behind, and might do so again.

While not exactly a condition of staying behind, David did demand of his military leaders, Joab, Abishai and Ittai, that they, ‘Deal gently with the young man Absalom for my sake’ (18:5). All the men leaving the city to confront Absalom heard David give this order. The battle was engaged in the ‘woods of Ephraim’ (18:6). On the northern side of the Jabok river, not far from Mahanaim, was a forest, a thick forest so it seems. Jungle warfare is very difficult and dangerous, as Australian soldiers who fought the Japanese in New Guinea would have told you. The forest or jungle itself claims many lives.

This is what happened in this civil war between David and Absalom. Low branches, and pits scattered through the woods proved to be deadly, such that ‘the woods devoured more people that day than the sword’ (18:8). The woods may also have harboured bears and lions. This is all we are told about the battle, apart from the fact that twenty thousand men lay dead, before Joab blew the trumpet to call off the battle (18:7, 16). David’s men defeated the forces of Israel led by Absalom.

**2. Death of Absalom**

Absalom was leading his rebel army in this battle in the woods of Ephraim. As their self-appointed leader and king, he was riding on a mule, probably dressed in royal regalia (18:9). As he rode under a terebinth tree his head got caught in a branch and when his mule went on he was left hanging in the tree (18:9). Many picture Absalom hanging by his long hair, although the text does actually say this; but we were told that Absalom was proud of thick head of hair (14:26).

One of David’s men saw Absalom hanging from a tree, ‘hanging between heaven and earth’, and went to tell Joab (18:9, 10). Joab scolded him for not striking him dead there and then: ‘What! You just saw him and did nothing’?’ (18:11). Joab understood that Absalom, like David, was critical to the outcome of this civil war. He had in the past got Absalom a meeting with his father in the hope that they would be reconciled; but burning Joab’s barley crop was not a wise thing to do! Joab was driven by self-interest and could be violent.

Joab told the man who found Absalom hanging in the tree he would have rewarded him if he had struck Absalom, and, we assume, brought his severed head to Joab (18:11); was this a promise Joab had made? This man would have nothing to do with Joab’s promise of a reward. He bravely told Joab that no amount of money would make him disobey the king’s command to spare Absalom. Besides, he knew what David might do to such a person, and he knew Joab would not stand by him when it came to the crunch (18:12, 13). This loyal servant stands in contrast to the ruthless and self-serving Joab.

Joab did not want to hear any more reasoning or talk about obedience. He knew what had to be done to stop the war. He took three spears and ‘thrust them through Absalom’s heart’ or chest (18:14). The spears did not kill Absalom immediately because we read that ten of Joab’s armour bearers came and struck Absalom and killed him, probably after cutting him down from the tree. Even so, the words of Deuteronomy 21:23 come to mind: ‘He who is hanged is accused of God’. With Absalom dead, Joab blew the trumpet or ram’s horn to call off the battle, at least for his men. The men of Israel would have realised what had happened so fled to their tents, and eventually back to their homes in Israel.

Absalom’s time as king of Israel was very brief; he was never anointed king anyway. It ended with his brutal death and ignominious burial, the burial of an enemy or criminal rather than a ruler (Josh 8:29). Joab and his men simply threw Absalom’s corpse into a pit and covered it with stones, lots of stones (18:17). This pile of stones mocked the monument Absalom had already built to himself in the King’s Valley (18:18); not even David set up monument! Absalom said he had no son to continue his name; the three sons previously referred to, along with his daughter Tamar, must have died (14:27). Still today, some men want to be remembered by earthly monuments of some sort rather than through god-fearing children. As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, our aim is to be remembered by the Lord in his Book of Life, and seek a heavenly reward in Christ Jesus.

**3. David hears of Absalom’s death**

The young man Ahimaaz suddenly appears and pleads with Joab to send him to David with news that David’s enemies have been defeated (18:19). But Joab was worried what David might do to the person telling him that his son was dead, and with good reason- remember the man who told him Saul was dead, and also Ishbotheth! So Joab called a Cushite, a man from Ethiopia, to go and tell the king what he had seen (18:20, 21). Ahimaaz persisted until Joab let him go. Ahimaaz was athletic, and by running around the woods reached the city before the Cushite.

A watchman at the gate into Mahanaim saw Ahimaaz running towards the city and told David, who was waiting at the gate for news (18:24-27). He recognised the single runner as Ahimaaz, so David assumed he had good news; if all his men were running towards the gate it would not have been good news! When the Cushite was also spotted, David still thought he was bringing good news. Ahimaaz told David, ‘All is well!’, as he bowed before his king; the enemy had been defeated. When David asked if ‘the young man Absalom is safe’, Ahimaaz dodged the question; all he had seen was ‘a great tumult’ (18:29). When the Cushite arrived he was asked the same question by David. He was also indirect in his answer but indicated that the ‘young man’ Absalom had suffered the fate all men who rise up to harm David should suffer (18:32).

**4. David’s grief and guilt**

‘O my son Absalom- my son, my son Absalom’. These words in verse 33, repeated in verse 4 of the next chapter, say it all regarding the grief that came upon David when told of Absalom’s death. The text says he was ‘deeply moved’ and went into the watchtower and wept (18:33). David had commanded his men to deal gently with the young man Absalom for his sake, but Joab was not having anything of this ‘dealing gently’ with a traitor and coup leader in Israel, even if he was David’s ‘young man’.

David was conflicted, and we might have some sympathy for him; after all, a son is a son even if he is a criminal or traitor. But this was the very attitude that landed David in the predicament he was in; he failed to exercise justice when Absalom murdered Amnon, and failed to exercise justice when Amnon raped his half-sister, Tamar. David was still letting his feelings get in the way of justice. Guilt from his own sin was probably clouding his judgment. He felt responsible for the tragedy striking his family- ‘if only I had died in your place!’ (18:33).

David had more than the loss of his son to consider; he was king of Israel! Thousands of men has risked their lives in defending David against his treacherous son. Joab reminded David of these men, men now slipping back into the city while David wept for the man who was attacking them. Joab gave David an ultimatum: stop the weeping and mourning and welcome his soldiers returning in victory or he will have no soldiers (19:7). He must stop loving his enemies, even his own flesh and blood, and hating his friends, men ready to die for him (19:6).

Favouritism is condemned in the Bible (Deut 1:17, James 2:9). Favouritism towards relatives in bestowing offices is called ‘nepotism’. This is a sin that has brought ruination to many businesses and churches. The Christian Institute in which I taught while in India was guilty of nepotism, as were many churches. People think the rules about office bearers in our church are too strict, but take a look at churches that have no such rules, churches where sons, and daughters, take over church leadership from their father, even when not qualified, and without any questions asked. It is natural to favour family members, sinfully natural! Let David’s behaviour towards his son Absalom be a lesson to all in this regard!