

“David the Weeping Father”

(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 83)

2 Samuel 12 – 20

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David the strong king; David the faith-filled poet; David the repentant sinner ... today we turn to a fourth aspect of David’s life: David the weeping father.

I mentioned last week that David had seven wives prior to Bathsheba, who became #8. The preceding seven were Michal, Ahinoam, Abigail, Maacah, Haggith, Abital, and Eglah. Michal was the daughter of King Saul; Abigail was the widow of a wealthy but wicked man named Nabal; Maacah was the daughter of the King of Geshur (so that may have been a politically-motivated marriage); the rest we know virtually nothing about. Of the eight, the only one who – we are told – truly loved David was Michal, his first wife, but she never bore David any children.

David’s seven other wives did. Ahinoam bore Amnon, Abigail bore Chileab (also called Daniel), Maacah bore Absalom and Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1), Haggith bore Adonijah, Abital bore Shephatiah, Eglah bore Ithream (1 Chronicles 3:1-3; 2 Samuel 3:2-5) – six sons and one daughter from the middle six wives, all born during the early years of David’s kingdom when he ruled from Hebron. Later, in Jerusalem, Bathsheba bore five sons for David – one conceived before their wedding and four after. The first one dies; the names of the other four are Shimea (or Shammua), Shobab, Nathan, and Solomon (1 Chronicles 3:5; 2 Samuel 5:14). David and his wives had nine *more* children, whose names are recorded in 1 Chronicles (1 Chronicles 3:6; cf. 2 Samuel 5:15-16); then there were more beyond that, born to his concubines, one of whom was named Jerimoth (2 Chronicles 11:8). That’s a total of 21 children whose names we know, and *more* beyond that whose names we don’t know. (I thought I had a lot of kids!)

I want to know: how could one man *possibly* be a good father to *that many* children? The answer is ... maybe he wasn’t.

There are a series of sad stories about what some of these children did when they were grown. These stories are only recorded in 2 Samuel; the editor of Chronicles once again skips right over the sordid details. Either the stories were irrelevant to his purpose, or he was trying to protect David’s reputation. It’s interesting that even in the Bible there are different storytellers with different agendas.

It begins with Amnon, David’s eldest son. He falls in love with his half-sister Tamar – if “love” is

the right word for it. Pretending to be sick, he tricks David into sending Tamar to him; when she arrives, he makes a pass at her; when she objects, he rapes her. This is the third clear instance of rape in the Bible – there was Dinah, back in Genesis 34; and the Levite concubine, back in Judges 19. This was as heinous a crime in ancient Israel as it is for us today. Tamar pleads with Amnon: “Such a thing shouldn’t be done in Israel. Don’t do this horrible thing. Think about me – where could I hide my shame? And you – you would become like some fool in Israel!” (2 Samuel 13.12-13) But Amnon simply doesn’t care. He doesn’t care about the fact that it’s wrong, and he doesn’t care about her. When the deed is done, he tells her to get out; she leaves his room in tears, and makes her way to her brother Absalom, who tells her to just “keep quiet” and “don’t let it bother you,” since the perpetrator was her half-brother (2 Samuel 13.20). When David gets wind of what happened, he is angry, but he does nothing: “he refused to punish his son Amnon because he loved him as his oldest child.” (2 Samuel 13.21) Amnon got special treatment because his dad was the king and the royal family decided to cover it up. There were laws in the book of Deuteronomy about what to do in cases of rape; but if the royal family knew about them, they chose to ignore them. Tamar is a victim twice over. There should be moral outrage, not a cover-up; Amnon should be punished, not protected. The fact that he’s the eldest son of the king should make *no difference*. What he did was *cruel* and *wrong*. He basically gets off scot-free ... for a while.

Two years later, as an act of vengeance, Tamar’s brother Absalom arranges for Amnon to be murdered. Word reaches King David that Absalom has killed Amnon. David grieves and Absalom flees. For three years Absalom lives in exile. Finally David’s general Joab persuades David to allow Absalom to return home, but David refuses to meet Absalom face-to-face for two whole years. Perhaps he’s harboring resentment; perhaps he’s trying to forgive; perhaps he simply doesn’t know what to say. It would have been better if they could have had a conversation. Finally Absalom uses David’s general Joab to gain an audience with his father the king, but if words were spoken between father and son, they are not recorded. Absalom bows to David; David kisses Absalom, and that’s that.

There are times when a father *needs* to talk with his child about the past, times when actions simply aren’t enough. There are wounds in this family; there is dysfunction; they *need* to talk about it.

David is such a complex character. He was *incredibly* effective gaining victory over Israel’s foreign enemies, and so *incredibly ineffective* managing his own house. He was a man of deep faith; he had a robust relationship with God – yet there’s no indication that he taught *any* of his children how to *follow* God, how to *pursue* God, how to *listen* for God. There’s no evidence anywhere that he made *any* effort to raise his kids in the faith. Perhaps he thought their mothers would take care of that. Perhaps he was too busy being a *king* to be a *dad*. Perhaps his *job* mattered more to him than his *family*.

Or perhaps he simply didn’t know the right words to say. It doesn’t come naturally for a lot of us, does it – knowing how and when to talk to our kids about the faith. I think David missed some opportunities. And I think it cost him. Him, and all his children ... and, eventually, his whole country.

Several years pass. Absalom gains popularity by talking with the people who are coming to the king for judgment in civil cases, telling them that the king is too busy to listen to them but that if he were a judge than anyone with a lawsuit could come to him, and he would help them. He’s undermining

his father's authority; he's sowing discontent among the populace – and David seems remarkably unaware of what his son is doing. If he knows about it, he's choosing to ignore it, maybe hoping it will just go away. There are times a dad needs to *confront* his son. After four years of this, Absalom requests permission from David to leave Jerusalem so he can fulfill a religious vow – which is a complete lie; Absalom made no such vow; he is taking the name of the Lord in vain. David grants his request. Absalom takes two hundred men with him and sends secret messages through the whole country that he is claiming the title of king. David is completely unprepared for an outright rebellion; he quickly gathers up his men and flees the city of Jerusalem before Absalom arrives to lay siege to it. He climbs the Mount of Olives, weeping, with Jerusalem at his back. Is he crying over his lost city? His lost kingdom? His rebellious son? Everything that has gone wrong in his family? Maybe all of it.

David walks, with people cursing him and throwing rocks at him, all the way to the river Jordan. Absalom enters Jerusalem. David had left ten of his concubines behind to take care of the palace; Absalom, in a heinous act in full view of the whole city, claims those concubines for his own – fulfilling one of the prophecies that Nathan the prophet had uttered, after David's affair with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. Absalom then pursues David all the way to the Jordan River and beyond, intending to kill him; David rallies troops around him and gives orders that Absalom is not to be harmed. There is a huge battle; 20,000 Israelites die in one day; Joab disobeys David's orders and makes sure that Absalom winds up dead. Messengers reach king David with the news that Absalom is dead. David has now lost *three* of his sons as a direct result of human sin. He cries out: "Oh, my son Absalom! Oh, my son! My son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! Oh, Absalom, my son! My son!" (2 Samuel 18.33)

It takes some time to return things to right again, but eventually David quells the rest of the rebellion, returns to Jerusalem, tends to the concubines that Absalom had wronged, and reclaims his throne. His kingdom is once again at peace. But what about his heart? What about his family? What grief will David carry all the way to his grave? His daughter, raped by his son; his son, murdered by his half-brother; that half-brother, exiled, then rebelling and plotting patricide, now dead. Twenty-thousand men dead, the country in turmoil – all because of the dysfunction in David's own household. It's amazing the ripple effect a man can have when he's not properly tending to the needs of his family.

Yes, that's what I think was going on here. I think David forgot one of his most important jobs: the job of being *a dad*. I don't care how important anybody thinks their job is. There are plenty of us who think we have really important jobs. But if you're married, if you've got children, then you have responsibilities. You have jobs you need to do. Tend to the needs of your family. Make time for your spouse and your kids. Raise them. Give them the attention they need and deserve. Teach them about right and wrong. Help them to develop a relationship with God. I don't think David did those things. I think he was too busy being king. As king, he did lots of great things for his country. But he almost lost everything, *including* his kingdom, because of what was going on within his own family, with the children that he himself had sired. Those kids needed a *dad* ... and I'm not sure they had one.

I don't care if you're a commoner or a king, the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, or the President of the United States. If you have kids – be the parent they truly need.

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