

I Wish I had Died for You

Murray 2013

By Dr. David P. Murray

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: 2 Samuel 18:33
Preached on: Sunday, May 5, 2013

Free Reformed Church of Grand Rapids
950 Ball Ave NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Website: www.frcgr.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/frcgr

Let us read again in 2 Samuel 18 and verse 33,

33 And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!

David is described in Scripture as the man after God's own heart. We'd like to use that description of David and this narrative about David to give us a glimpse into God's heart this evening. There were many things about David that reflect, that reveal, that pull back, as it were, the curtains and let us see what God is like, how David is like God's heart. This chapter is perhaps one of the peaks, one of the greatest revelations of God's heart through the life of David.

First of all, here notice there's a prayer, "Don't let him die." That's what David prays at the beginning of this chapter. You know, here David has been thrown off his throne, cast out the city, he's in exile, as it were, Absalom has taken over, he has acted sinfully, wickedly against his father, he has humiliated him before this subjects, and so here David is outside but David is gathering his troops, he is getting ready for a comeback and so here in chapter 18, he's got a smallish army, at least compared to Absalom, and yet he's making the most of it, he's getting organized, he's using his military skill, and he's giving them orders and one of the things he asks is to go with the three divisions, and the leaders of these three divisions say, "No, David, you stay here." If you notice in verse 3, "Thou shalt not go forth: for if we flee away, they won't care for us; if half of us die, they won't care for us. You're worth 10,000 of us: therefore it's better that you stay and support us here."

It's interesting, David says, "What seemeth you best I will do." It's very unusual for a great military general, the overseer of all armies to act like this, in such a humble, teachable way. I think it reveals something of how David's errors, David's sins had weakened him. Here now those who are under him are sort of dictating policy and he's been humbled, he's been brought low, he's not got the confidence, the assurance, the self-certainty that he used to have and he submits to the advice, but he gives one instruction

that he wants them to abide by. You'll notice in verse 5, he turns to these hard, ruthless leaders and says, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man, even with Absalom." And you'll notice that prayer, "Don't let him die," is actually uttered in front of all the people, it says all the people heard when the king gave all the captains charge concerning Absalom.

So here we've got this aged parent, he's driven from his home, he's humiliated before his subjects, he's deprived of his throne, he's got this son who was already a wicked man who he accepted back into Jerusalem and then turned traitor against him and threw him out, and yet what is his prayer? "Don't let him die. Deal gently with the young man Absalom for my sake." We're reminded, are we not, of Psalm 103, such pity as a father has unto his children dear, like pity shows the Lord to such as worship him in fear. Here we have the worst of sons. You couldn't imagine, really, a worse son than Absalom. None more rebellious. None more wicked. None more ungrateful and yet here we have the best of fathers to the worst of sons, a son deserving to die and yet here, "Deal gently."

It's such an example, isn't it, of Psalm 103. You've got this beautiful pity of a father and yet we mustn't stop there with human pity because the Psalmist himself says that that's just a picture, it's an illustration, it's a window into the heart of God, like pity shows the Lord to such as worship him in fear. In other words, when we look here and we hear this prayer, "Deal gently with the young man," it's deal gently with this rebel, deal gently with this criminal, deal gently with this mutinous son, deal gently with this wicked murderer. We get such a beautiful insight into God's attitude and approach to similar rebels. We have here almost like a foreshadowing of, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Some of us are here tonight as rebels, mutineers, criminals, sinning against the best of Fathers, and the only reason we still exist, the only reason we breathe is because of this prayer in the heart of God, "Deal gently." It's because he's dealing gently. He's not dealing justly, he's dealing gently. It's because he pities. It's because he's compassionate. That's why you exist, because there is this desire reflected in David's life, this desire in the heart of God, "Don't let them die. Don't let them die."

But secondly, we have here he deserved to die. Absalom, yes. David prays, "Don't let him die," yet the passage makes so clear he deserved it. He so deserved it. The battle is commenced here in verse 6, "the people went out into the field against Israel: the battle was in the wood of Ephraim," and there was a terrible slaughter. Absalom's responsible for this, 20,000 lives lost. We're told that more died here in verse 8, more died because of the wood, the forest, than the sword that day. We don't know quite what that means. It may be the wood was full of bogs and other kinds of traps, maybe even wild animals. We're not sure but in some way or other more than 10,000 were killed by the actual the landscape, the natural landscape, the forest, the wood, than they were by the sword and the hands of soldiers. It's a terrible slaughter. Of course, God is in this, God is behind David, God's promised David the throne. It shows here there's a minority army and a majority army but the minority maraudes through the majority and it shows us again if God be for us, who can be against us?

But what about Absalom? Well, we read here in verse 9, "Absalom met the servants of David." There's an encounter, a coming together. Absalom's riding on this donkey, the donkey goes under the thick boughs, the big branches of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away. And there's really poetic justice in this because we're told, "He that exalts himself shall be abased." We read that in Luke 14:11, and Absalom was an incredibly proud young man and he was especially proud of his head, of his hair, so much of it did he have that he used to weigh it and display it. He was vain, full of self-love, and it would appear that the very thing that he was most proud of was his downfall. He exalted himself and yet it would appear that the very hair he gloried and was one of the means of his own death and destruction. He ends up, as it were, grasped between the arms of a great oak tree. The donkey goes on ahead and he's left there hanging, unable to disentangle himself. He is here humiliated. He is abased. He's lost all his dignity. Somebody sees him, a certain man, verse 10, goes and tells Joab and Joab says, "Well, why didn't you kill him?" The man says, "Well, David told us not to." But Joab says, "You should have done it anyway." Joab goes and we read in verse 14 that he took three darts or spears and thrust them through the heart of Absalom while he was yet alive in the midst of the oak. Three times, and then this young man came in verse 15, they surrounded him, they smote him, and they slew him.

Well, it's a terrible end, isn't it? Here he was ready to lord over the kingdom, to take the throne, to get rid of all opposition, and here he ends hanging there by his hair, then executed in cold blood. Then the young men set about him and then throw a pile of stones upon him. And then the reader himself sees the contrast, the irony of all this because notice it says in verse 17 they took Absalom, they cast him into a great pit in the wood, they laid a very great heap of stones upon him. All Israel fled, everyone to his tent. "Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and reared up for himself a pillar, which is in the king's dale: for he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance: and he called the pillar after his own name." Here the narrator is saying Absalom had great plans for himself. He had erected this huge monument to his own name and his own glory so that, although no son would keep his name going, this great monument, this great obelisk would, the people would remember Absalom forever, and instead of this big stone being associated with him, what was associated with him is a heap of stones in a forest. Here he had this great ambition, he was going to be so big, and instead what do we find? God humiliates him. God brings him down.

"He that exalts himself shall be abased." It's an unbreakable rule. God's promised that will happen either in this world or in the world to come, however high we rise by sinful means and pride and conceit and vanity, however big we think we are, God's going to bring us down. He'll bring us down mercifully by convicting us of sin and bringing us to humble repentance, or he'll bring us down in justice here in this world as in Absalom's case or in the world to come. But be sure everyone will be brought down one way or another by grace or by justice.

"He that exalts himself shall be abased." He deserved this death. That's what the storyteller is telling us. Not just for his pride but also because of his dishonoring of his

father and his mother. As we've said, David was not a perfect father but he was a great father, a godly man, and yet here this young man rebels against him and aspires so much to the throne that he's willing to sacrifice his own father's life, such is his ambition. We're told, aren't we, honor your father and your mother that your days may be long upon the earth which the Lord your God gives you. Here Absalom's thinking, "I'm going to bring down my father and then my life will be great in quantity and quality." He's got his own way to fulfill this promise and God says, "Oh no you don't."

Dishonoring a father and mother here results in this premature judgment and death and it's awful, you see him hanging there, it's almost as if he's not fit for either heaven or earth. He's just hanging in midair. We're told earlier on in the Old Testament, "Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree." This was one of the greatest punishments and judgments, one of the most humiliating executions anyone could have, and this is how God ordains Absalom to die. He deserved this. He deserved it for his pride. He deserved it for his dishonoring of father and mother and so do we. We deserve to die too. Who here has not lifted himself or herself up too high in their own estimation? Who here has not dishonored father and mother? Not, of course, to the extent of Absalom but seriously enough to incur God's wrath and curse upon us? We deserve to die. God's mercy that we are not dead.

But thirdly here notice David says, "I wish he hadn't died." He prayed, "Don't let him die." The narrative makes it clear he deserved to die but now David expresses this further insight into God's heart, "I wish he hadn't died." Now it's a strange paradox. We can't put everything together here. God here says upfront through David, "I don't want him to die," then God says he deserves to die and is involved in his execution as we'll see, and yet still God says, "I wish he hadn't died." We're told in Ezekiel God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He'd rather that the wicked turn and live.

So here the news is brought back to David and there's a little confusing incident here where two men are involved in bringing the message. One is called Ahimaaz and the other is called Cush, and Ahimaaz seems to be a young man and Cush seems to be a more experienced mature man, more hardened. Ahimaaz is the son of Zadok the priest, one of the most loyal of David's citizens, a godly man, and Ahimaaz himself seems to be a godly young man because you notice in verse 19, "Ahimaaz the son of Zadok [says], Let me now run, and bear the king tidings, how that the LORD hath avenged him of his enemies." And when he does actually come, the king says he's a good man. He comes with good tidings. He was well-known to be a godly encourager of the king, and when Ahimaaz comes, he says, "All is well." He falls down to the earth upon his face before the king and says, "Blessed be the LORD thy God, which hath delivered up the men that lifted up their hand against my lord the king." Again, just pointing attention to the Lord.

So you wonder, well, why didn't Joab, the commander, want Ahimaaz to do this? Ahimaaz volunteers and Joab says, "No, not you, not today. You bear tidings another day." Verse 20, "This day no because the king's son is dead," he says. Joab clearly knew Ahimaaz, he knew the impact of Absalom's death upon the king. It would appear that Joab preferred maybe a harder, more experienced, more mature, maybe a more unfeeling

man to break this news. He felt if Ahimaaz went with this, that the king wouldn't respond so well, that he would be less guarded and he would break down which is, in fact, what he did. Joab though sends Cushie and Ahimaaz keeps pleading, "I want to do it! I want to do it!" And eventually Joab relents and says, "Okay, see if you can catch up and do it yourself."

And so here he comes and David is really quite a pathetic figure in this situation. He's sitting at the gate of the city that they've taken refuge in and he's looking and he's waiting. It's sort of a picture of helplessness in a way and he must have been thinking about all that led up to this. He'd been told, hadn't he, remember for his murder and his adultery, "The sword will never depart from your house." He knew it was his own sin that had brought much of this upon his family and his nation and he looks up and he sees these men running and Ahimaaz reaches there first and Ahimaaz gives this information, doesn't give him everything, seems to conceal in some way the terrible news about Absalom's death, maybe that's again why Joab didn't want him to go. And the king says, "You stay there," and he turns. Cushie comes and he says, "the LORD hath avenged thee this day of all them that rose up against thee." And the king's question is, it's very personal. It doesn't really seem to be concerned with, "Did the army win? Have we secured the city? Is Jerusalem ours?" But, "Is the young man Absalom safe?" And Cushie answered, "The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is." It's quite hard, isn't it? It's right between the eyes. "He's dead and I'm glad he's dead. Like all your enemies, they are just finished and over and done with today." There's no sensitivity, is there? There's no sympathy. And we read then, "the king was much moved," the king was much moved, "and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" I wish he hadn't died. For all that he was and for all that he had done, I wish he hadn't died. For all that he deserved to die, I wish he hadn't died.

What do we have here? Well, we have natural grief, appropriate natural grief. It's appropriate to grieve over the death of a loved one, even a rebellious loved one. God's given us grief as a sort of safety valve for the pain of grief. But what we have here is not just natural grief, we have excessive natural grief. Excessive natural grief which becomes clear in the next chapter. News comes back to Joab of the king weeping and mourning for Absalom and the victory that day was turned into mourning for the people heard that day how the king was grieved for his son, and so all the people come back, they'd fought for David and we read they crept into the city in stealth, they weren't coming back celebrating and rejoicing and triumphing, but they're sneaking in quietly, "Don't let the king see us. Don't let the king know," because they'd heard how grieved the king was and the king covered his face, the king cried with a loud voice, "Oh my son Absalom! Oh, Absalom my son, my son!" And Joab, this voice is clearly going all over the city and people are hiding and Joab comes to the king and says, "You've shamed today the faces of all thy servants which this they have saved thy life and the lives of thy sons and of thy daughters and the lives of thy wives and the lives of thy concubines. It looks as if you love your enemies more than your friends. It looks as if you prefer that we had died rather than Absalom and the rest of them." All they were hearing was, "My son, my son, my

son!" And he wasn't seeing the Lord in it. He wasn't seeing the victory that God had given. He wasn't seeing the providence of God. He wasn't accepting submissively the providence of God.

It was excessive natural grief. He was quarreling with divine providence. He was putting his family before God and before his kingdom. All he seemed to get focused on, at least for this time, was, "My son!" Losing sight of his God, of the church, of the cause of Christ in the land, the people of God. Excessive natural grief. "My son, my son!" But there's more than that here, there's spiritual grief here. Spiritual grief. Surely behind these words we can hear in this, the life of this godly man, behind the "My son, my son!" we hear, "My sin, my sin!" because that was what was ultimately the cause of all this. This is now the third son that David had lost as a result of his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah. You can imagine the spiritual grief, the conviction there must have been in this man's heart and soul as every time he said it, "My son," he must have heard an echo in his conscience, "My sin! My son! My sin! My son! My sin!" As the Holy Spirit connected these things in his own experience, his natural grief was excessive but his spiritual grief was exemplary.

"I wish he hadn't died." There's beautiful love in this. There's beautiful spiritual concern. There's beautiful insight into the heart of God. There's no pleasure here or in God in the death of the wicked, even when God himself inflicts it and orders it and does it. There's no delightful vindictiveness. He would rather that the wicked turn from his ways and live. But there's a climactic insight here into the heart of God, not just don't let him die, no, he deserves to die; not just I wish he hadn't died, but fourthly, "I wish I had died in his place. I wish I had died in his place." That's what he says here, isn't it? "Would God I had died for thee. God, I wish this had been reversed. I wish that it had been possible that instead of Absalom died, I died, and that my dying would save Absalom from dying." Why was there this desire for substitution? Why was there this desire for this exchange of deaths?

Well, of course it was because David knew that if he had died, he would go to heaven. He was a believer and he knew that Absalom dying as an unbeliever, an ungodly, unrepentant rebel went to hell, and so David looks at the consequences of these two deaths. Yes, he can see in this world that it's for good, that ultimately this is part of God's plan for preserving the kingdom of Israel in order that from Israel the Messiah would eventually come as he promised David, but David's seeing beyond this world here, he's seeing into another world. He's seeing beyond Absalom hanging dead in a tree or under a pile of stones. He's seeing Absalom in hell. He's seeing Absalom burning forever. He's seeing Absalom in outer darkness forever. He's seeing Absalom in torment and torture forever. He's seeing Absalom under the wrath of God and the judgment of God forever. He's seeing him being pierced through not with daggers but with many sorrows. He sees the weight not of stones coming upon him but the weight of God's holy justice. He's seeing not just Joab's aggression against him and the young men's violence, but he's seeing the omnipotent Almighty God going out against him in wrath and that forever. "Would God I had died for thee! I wish I had died in your place, Absalom, at least to give you more time on this earth to find a Savior, to repent of your sins, to turn to the Lord, to look towards David's greatest son! Would God I had died and you had lived! I'm safe, I'm

going straight to glory, I'm getting away from all the sorrows and trials and torments and pains of this world, straight into blessedness forever, holiness forever, purity forever, happiness forever, there in the presence of my great Messiah forever, the one who will descend for me physically, David's greatest son, that will be my end, that will be my eternity. I wish I had died. I wish I had died in your place, Absalom."

There's beautiful spiritual love here and it's a sentiment we find in various places in Scripture. You remember Moses when Israel had sinned so grievously, God says, "Get out of my way, Moses, I'm going to kill them all." And Moses said, "Please forgive them, and if you won't forgive them, blot me out of your book." Here's Moses coming forward and saying, "Take it out on me and spare them. Let me die instead of them." You have Paul in Romans 9 where he speaks of his kinsmen according to the flesh, the Jews, and he says, "I could wish that myself were accursed for my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. You see, if it would result in their salvation, I'm willing not just to die but to die accursed and to be cursed eternally." It's astonishing. "I wish I could die in the place of the Jews."

This is what we have here, these godly men, Moses, David, Paul, this holy, pure sentiment of beautiful spiritual love, "I wish I could die in the place of someone else." Of course, we can't. However much we long to and want to and wish we could, we might look at a son, we might look at a daughter, we might look at a father or a mother or a friend or a neighbor or a colleague, and at times, rarely but at times we might feel, "I wish I could die for them." And we can't, but one can and one has and that's Jesus Christ. He doesn't just wish it, he does it. He doesn't just look at perishing sinners and say, "Oh, I wish I could, I wish I could stand where you're standing and spare you this." He did it. The just for the unjust. The holy for the unholy. The perfect for the imperfect. The sinless for the sinful. That he might bring us to God. He gathered together all these beautiful desires and prayers and passions in his heart and came down to this world as David's son, the son of David, and had mercy on sinners like you and me by dying in our place. And he accomplished the substitution. He accomplished it. He effected it. So what if David had come between Absalom and Joab and said, "Kill me!" It would have spared Absalom maybe for another few years but it wouldn't have saved him from hell. But Jesus comes between a holy and an angry God and his people and says, "Take me and let them go." And that's what happened and that's what's still happening as sinners come to trust in him.

This is why David is called a man after God's own heart because the desire to substitute for sinners is embedded in the heart of deity, and not just the desire the deed, the doing of it, the accomplishing of it, and if David, as it were, opened a little window to show us what God's heart was like, Jesus rips the curtain and holds it wide open and lets this brilliant light blaze out across the whole world where God himself comes and says, "I want to die for you." This is your hope, your only hope, my only hope that God is like this and that God does this. We see Jesus himself, don't we, in this world when he came here weeping over Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!" Weeping over sinners. Wishing them the best. Desiring for them the best. "I don't want them to die. They deserve to die. I wish they weren't dying and I'll die in your place."

That's the Gospel. That's the good news. That's God. That's hope. That's bright, brilliant, heavenly light shining out here through David. Are you running from the light? Do you have a substitute? Do you have someone standing in your place tonight in the courts of heaven saying, "I died for her. I died for him. I died for that kid. I died for that old senior." Faith in Jesus is what gives that assurance. How are you facing the future? All alone? Without a Savior? Without a substitute? Without a stand-in? Without David's greatest son? It's not much of a future. It's no future. But what a future, what a future lies ahead through the son of David. Amen.

Let's pray.

We wonder, O God, can it be, can it be, is this possible, unless it were written in thy word, we couldn't believe it, we wouldn't believe it, we shouldn't believe it, but it is written. Help us to believe. Give us faith to believe what's almost unbelievable. By thy Holy Spirit work that saving faith into our hearts. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.