

The Life of David

Absalom Murders Amnon

2 Samuel 13:23-39

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Scripture

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* tells a story of obsession and vengeance. Captain Ahab, a whaler, loses a leg to a white whale. A smoldering anger begins to grow in the now one-legged captain. Melville writes:

I know that he was never very jolly; and I know that on the passage home, he was a little out of his mind for a spell. . . . I know, too, that ever since he lost his leg last voyage by that accursed whale, he's been a kind of moody—desperate moody, and savage sometimes.

Captain Ahab's anger grows into a fixation on revenge against the sea monster. As his hatred grows, so does his lack of wisdom. On his next whale-hunting trip, the driving force in his soul begins to override good judgment, putting himself, his crew, and his ship into insanely hazardous situations. Common sense is overruled by his wild passion for killing the white whale. All else is secondary. As the captain hurls man and ship into the perilous seas of hate, his opportunity to take vengeance finally arrives. The white whale is within Ahab's grasp. A chase ensues for three days. The crewmembers realize that Ahab's folly may mean doom—not for the whale, but for themselves.

A man named Starbuck, Ahab's first mate and the only one who dares to question the captain, cries out, "Oh! Ahab, not too late is it, even now, the third day, to desist. See! Moby Dick seeks you not. It is you, you, that madly seek him!"

But it is too late. Ahab's quest for vengeance grows deeper, ignoring every danger. In the end, the ship is lost; the crew, save one, is lost; and Ahab loses both his quest and his life.

The white whale has won.¹

Hatred, revenge, and vengeance are incredibly destructive attitudes. This is glaringly illustrated in today's lesson in which Absalom murdered his half-brother Amnon. Last time we learned that Amnon raped Tamar, Absalom's sister. Absalom took Tamar into his own home, and seethed with hatred against Amnon. For two years his hatred smoldered into vengeance against Amnon.

Let's read about Absalom murdering Amnon in 2 Samuel 13:23-39:

²³ After two full years Absalom had sheepshearers at Baal-hazor, which is near Ephraim, and Absalom invited all the king's sons. ²⁴ And Absalom came to the king and said, "Behold, your servant has sheepshearers. Please let the king and his servants go with your servant." ²⁵ But the king said to Absalom, "No, my son, let us not all go, lest we be burdensome to you." He pressed him, but he would not go but gave him his blessing. ²⁶ 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?" ²⁷ But Absalom pressed him until he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him. ²⁸ Then Absalom commanded his servants, "Mark when Amnon's heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, 'Strike Amnon,' then kill him. Do not fear; have I not commanded you? Be courageous and be valiant." ²⁹ So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded. Then all the king's sons arose, and each mounted his mule and fled.

³⁰ While they were on the way, news came to David, "Absalom has struck down all the king's sons, and not one of them is left." ³¹ Then the king arose and tore his garments and lay on the earth. And all his servants who were standing by tore their garments. ³² But Jonadab the son of Shimeah, David's brother, said, "Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men, the king's sons, for Amnon alone is dead. For by the command of Absalom this has been

¹ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2015/august/4081715.html>.

determined from the day he violated his sister Tamar.³³ Now therefore let not my lord the king so take it to heart as to suppose that all the king's sons are dead, for Amnon alone is dead.”

³⁴ But Absalom fled. And the young man who kept the watch lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, many people were coming from the road behind him by the side of the mountain. ³⁵ And Jonadab said to the king, “Behold, the king's sons have come; as your servant said, so it has come about.” ³⁶ And as soon as he had finished speaking, behold, the king's sons came and lifted up their voice and wept. And the king also and all his servants wept very bitterly.

³⁷ But Absalom fled and went to Talmai the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son day after day. ³⁸ So Absalom fled and went to Geshur, and was there three years. ³⁹ And the spirit of the king longed to go out to Absalom, because he was comforted about Amnon, since he was dead. (2 Samuel 13:23-39)

Introduction

Second Samuel 13 is a turning point in the life of David. From this chapter onwards, we see the consequences of David's sin of adultery and murder worked out in his life and kingdom. Moreover, God chastised David for his sin by decreeing that “the sword shall never depart from your house” and “I will raise up evil against you out of your own house” (2 Samuel 12:10–11).

The first part of Second Samuel 13 shows us the heinous sin of Amnon violating his half-sister Tamar. Absalom took Tamar into his own home, while he plotted vengeance against Amnon. Vengeance is defined as “punishment inflicted or retribution exacted for an injury or wrong.”² Amnon had clearly injured and dreadfully wronged Tamar. Her father David, however, should

² Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds., *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

have applied justice to Amnon, but he did not. So Absalom decided to take matters into his own hands: he would exact punishment for the wrong done to Tamar. He would get vengeance.

Lesson

The account of Absalom murdering Amnon in 2 Samuel 13:23-39 shows us how vengeance was carried out for sin.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Activity in the Vengeance (13:23-29)
2. The Passivity following the Vengeances (13:30-39)

I. The Activity in the Vengeance (13:23-29)

First, let's see the activity in the vengeance.

As is often the case with biblical narratives, verse 23 is a summary statement of the incident that is about to be told in greater detail, **“After two full years Absalom had sheepshearers at Baal-hazor, which is near Ephraim, and Absalom invited all the king's sons.”**

What happened during the **two full years**? *Nothing* happened. The record is silent. Perhaps David's anger abated. Perhaps Tamar's pain subsided. Perhaps people's memories dimmed. But Absalom's hatred burned (as we shall see in the narrative).

Baal-hazor, which was near the town of **Ephraim**, was about fifteen miles north-northeast of Jerusalem. The text says that **“Absalom had sheepshearers.”** Scholars suggest that it was probably a sheep-shearing feast. In any event, **Absalom invited all the king's sons** to this sheep-shearing feast. Upon a first reading, one may get the impression that Absalom was putting the event of two years earlier behind him, and that he wanted the family to all get along. That is what he wanted the family to think.

Absalom had been biding his time. He wanted this year's sheep-shearing feast to be a big one. **And Absalom came to the**

king and said, **“Behold, your servant has sheepshearers. Please let the king and his servants go with your servant”** (13:24). In addition to the invitation to King David’s sons, Absalom wanted the entire court of David to attend the feast. Absalom’s invitation was excessive, most likely knowing that his father would decline the invitation.

He was right. **But the king said to Absalom, “No, my son, let us not all go, lest we be burdensome to you”** (13:25a). David was responding like family members do when they think an invitation is excessive: “Oh no! That would be too much!” But Absalom **pressed him, but David would not go but gave him his blessing** (13:25b). David declined Absalom’s invitation but encouraged him to carry on with his feast.

Now Absalom was getting to what he really wanted. **Then Absalom said, “If not, please let my brother Amnon go with us”** (13:26a). If David would not attend the feast, then would he allow the crown prince to represent David at the feast? David hesitated, **and the king said to him, “Why should he go with you?”** (13:26b). The king suspected something was up. He knew that Absalom hated Amnon. So, why the invitation?

But Absalom was ready. He **pressed him until he let Amnon and all the king’s sons go with him** (13:27). Absalom somehow persuaded David to let all the princes attend Absalom’s feast. Of course, Absalom was not concerned about the other princes. His only concern was to get at Amnon.

This is now the second time that David had been hoodwinked by one of his sons into allowing two of his children to be together, and both times ended disastrously. The first time was when Amnon asked David to send Tamar to him. And now Absalom asked David to let Amnon come to his feast.

Absalom’s scheme was working out very well. Before the royal guests arrived, **Absalom commanded his servants, “Mark when Amnon’s heart is merry with wine, and when I say to**

you, **‘Strike Amnon,’ then kill him. Do not fear; have I not commanded you? Be courageous and be valiant**” (13:28). Absalom’s encouragement to his servants sounded similar to God’s own words of encouragement to his soldiers before they went into battle. For example, God said to Joshua just before entering the Promised Land, “Have I not commanded you? *Be strong and courageous*. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

Eventually the royal guests arrived. The sheep-shearing feast began. Everybody relaxed and enjoyed the food and the wine. Then, Absalom gave his deadly signal. **So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded** (13:29a). This murder took place in full view of everyone at the feast.

Notably, David’s two heinous sins of sexual immorality and murder are reflected in two of his sons. Amnon committed sexual immorality and Absalom committed murder. Like father, like son.

As soon as the guests saw what happened to Amnon, **all the king’s sons arose, and each mounted his mule and fled** (13:29b), no doubt fearing for their own lives.

If we were first-time readers of this narrative, we might ask ourselves, *What is happening to the future of the house of David? David’s family is in chaos. The future of God’s kingdom on earth is in jeopardy. What good can come out of all of this?*

It seems to me that we are meant to ask these questions. Let us remember that God was sovereignly orchestrating all these events to carry out his divine decree. These events were part of God’s promised chastisement of David. David was discovering that the sword was not departing from his house and that evil was being raised up from within his own house (*cf.* 2 Samuel 12:10-11).

Whenever we experience trouble in our lives, let us always remember that God is still in sovereign control of all things. He is carrying out his divine decree for his glory and our ultimate good.

II. The Passivity following the Vengeance (13:30-39)

And second, let's observe the passivity following the vengeance.

Verse 30 says, **“While they [that is, David’s sons] were on the way, news came to David, ‘Absalom has struck down all the king’s sons, and not one of them is left.’ ”** We know that this is not what happened. Only Amnon had been struck down. So, how did the news come to David that *all* his sons were killed?

The Bible does not tell us. But it seems probable that people were aware of Absalom’s seething hatred of Amnon. Moreover, at least Jonadab knew what Absalom had in mind, as we shall see in a moment. Perhaps people whispered among themselves that Absalom was going to kill all of David’s sons, not just Amnon. Somehow word of that got to a palace official, and he reported it to David as “news.”

However it came to David, he believed what he perhaps suspected might happen. **Then the king arose and tore his garments and lay on the earth. And all his servants who were standing by tore their garments** (13:31). David was distraught at the news that all of his beloved sons were dead.

But one person was in the know. That person was Jonadab. He had played an earlier part in Amnon’s deception of David. Now he brought a correction to the “news.” We wonder: *How did Jonadab know what had really happened?* Clearly, he was fully aware of Absalom’s plan, as we read in verses 32-33:

But Jonadab the son of Shimeah, David’s brother, said, “Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men, the king’s sons, for Amnon alone is dead. For by the command of Absalom this has been determined from the day he violated his sister Tamar. Now therefore let not my lord the king so take it to heart as to suppose that all the king’s sons are dead, for Amnon alone is dead.”

Jonadab knew a lot. Just as he had been a counselor to Amnon, he was now a confidant to Absalom. At this time, David only had Jonadab's version of what had happened.

The author of Samuel inserts at this point, **“But Absalom fled”** (13:34), an insertion that is repeated twice in this chapter (in verses 37 and 38). Absalom fled away from Jerusalem. He **went to Talmai the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur** (13:37a), who was his mother's father. He **went to Geshur**, which is east of the Sea of Galilee, **and was there three years** (13:38).

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, **the young man who kept the watch lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, many people were coming from the road behind him by the side of the mountain** (13:34). Exactly who and where they were coming from was not clearly stated. But Jonadab knew what was going on. **And Jonadab said to the king, “Behold, the king's sons have come; as your servant said, so it has come about”** (13:35). Jonadab was in effect saying, “See! I was right!” Undoubtedly, he was hoping that David would be so happy to see his sons that he would not ask Jonadab how he knew so accurately what had happened.

And as soon as he had finished speaking, behold, the king's sons came and lifted up their voice and wept. And the king also and all his servants wept very bitterly (13:36). Surely David was greatly relieved to see that *all* of his sons had not been killed. Nevertheless, he joined the rest of his sons in grieving over the murder of the crown prince, Amnon. Commentator John Woodhouse notes, “David's firstborn son was dead, at the hand of his third son. David's house had become a house deeply and bitterly divided against itself (*cf.* Matthew 12:25).”³

Amnon was dead. Absalom had fled. He would spend three years in Geshur. What was David's reaction to this? Verse 37b

³ John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel: Your Kingdom Come*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 358.

says, **“And David mourned for his son day after day.”** For which son did David mourn? Amnon? Or Absalom? The text is not clear. At first reading it would seem that David was mourning Amnon. But, it is entirely likely that David mourned the lost relationship with Absalom too. This seems to be confirmed by verse 39, which is difficult to translate from the Hebrew, **“And the spirit of the king longed to go out to Absalom, because he was comforted about Amnon, since he was dead.”** Part of the reason for the difficulty is that the Hebrew for **“longed”** could also be translated as “ceased,” so that the phrase would read, “And the spirit of the king ceased to go out to Absalom.” The note in *The ESV Study Bible* summarizes, “The author is thus telling readers either that David yearned to see his son or that he no longer wanted to take vengeance on him; in either case, readers are set up for Absalom’s return in the next chapter.”⁴

The point I want to emphasize here is that David did nothing—again. After Amnon violated Tamar, we read, “When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry” (13:21). He was angry, but he did absolutely nothing to punish Amnon. Now that Absalom had murdered Amnon, we read of David mourning and his spirit longing to go out to Absalom, but he again did absolutely nothing to punish Absalom.

Perhaps Absalom was counting on the fact that his father was passive so that he took it upon himself to exact vengeance upon Amnon.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Absalom murdering Amnon in 2 Samuel 13:23-39, let us leave vengeance to the Lord.

Richard Phillips notes three points about the biblical doctrine of vengeance, which is summed up by Paul, “Vengeance is mine,

⁴ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 564.

I will repay, says the Lord” (Romans 12:19b).

First, God takes vengeance on sins that have been committed. Modern people do not like the idea of a God who punishes sin with retribution. They prefer to think of God simply leaving people to suffer the inevitable consequences of their sin rather than suffering punishment by God’s hand. However, the Bible is filled with examples of God’s retributive justice. Examples include the flood during Noah’s time, the ten plagues on Egypt during Moses’ time, the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BC, and many more.

Second, since God takes vengeance on all sin, individuals are not allowed to take justice into their own hands. “Vengeance is mine,” not yours, “says the Lord” (Romans 12:19b). Absalom may have felt justified in taking justice into his own hands because David had not done anything about it. It is true that David, like today’s civil authorities, had a legal obligation to enforce justice. But by taking vengeance into his own hands, Absalom not only multiplied sin but also forgot the Lord. When the Bible commands us to “never avenge yourselves,” it adds that we are to “leave it to the wrath of God” (12:19a).

And third, since God takes vengeance on all sin, and individuals are not allowed to take justice into their own hands, the proper Christian response to sin is to do good. Because God avenges evil and judges all sin in his wrath, Paul continues, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink” (Romans 12:20a). Absalom should have brought the matter regarding Amnon before David for justice. If David failed to do anything, as he did, Absalom should have appealed to Amnon to repent of his sin while showing him kindness. If Amnon did repent, Absalom should have forgiven him. If Amnon did not repent, Absalom should have trusted God to exact vengeance at the final judgment. By taking vengeance himself, Absalom failed to honor God’s sovereignty.

Let us always leave vengeance to the Lord. Amen.

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and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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