

The Prodigal's Return

2 Samuel 14:1-33

By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)

Now turn with me once again to 2 Samuel and tonight to 2 Samuel chapter 14. Now before I read the chapter, I just want to point out one particular issue. In the closing verse of chapter 13, we read that “Joab the son of Zeruiah knew that the king's heart went out to Absalom.” If you’re reading the ESV you’ll notice that there's a little footnote right down at the bottom of the page. It says, “Compare Vulgate” — Vulgate is the Latin translation by Jerome, of great prominence, but it reads, “Ceased to go out.” One says, “the king's heart went out to Absalom,” and there is this tradition of interpretation or translation that says David’ heart “ceased to go out to Absalom.” I just want you to know that there are some very fine scholars and commentators, one that would be very familiar to you, who take that footnote reading. I looked at all of this, this week, in all of its detail for all of ten seconds, and decided I was going with the ESV, or the New American Standard, or the NIV, or the King James Version of the Bible. (laughter) But there is that tradition and obviously it affects the interpretation somewhat.

But let's read now the Word of God as we find it in 2 Samuel 14. Before we do so, let's pray.

Father, we thank You for the Scriptures. We thank You that we can have an absolute certainty as to what they are. We thank You for holy men of old that were carried along by the Holy Spirit. We may have differences of opinion as to the translation of this text, but we thank You for the text itself and we bless You, Lord, that You have given to us a Word that is able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Now bless us as we read this Word together. It is Your words — the very voice of God. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear the Word of God:

Now Joab the son of Zeruiah knew that the king's heart went out to Absalom. And Joab sent to Tekoa and brought from there a wise woman and said to her, "Pretend to be a mourner and put on mourning garments. Do not anoint yourself with oil, but behave like a woman who has been mourning many days for the dead. Go to the king and speak thus to him." So Joab put the words in her mouth.

When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and paid homage and said, "Save me, O king." And the king said to her, "What is your trouble?" She answered, "Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead. And your servant had two sons, and they quarreled with one another in the field. There was no one to separate them, and one struck the other and killed him. And now the whole clan has risen against your servant, and they say, 'Give up the man who struck his brother, that we may put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed.' And so they would destroy the heir also. Thus they would quench my coal that is left and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth."

Then the king said to the woman, "Go to your house, and I will give orders concerning you." And the woman of Tekoa said to the king, "On me be the guilt, my lord the king, and on my father's house, let the king and his throne be guiltless." The king said, "If anyone says anything to you, bring him to me, and he shall never touch you again." Then she said, "Please let the king invoke the LORD your God, that the avenger of blood kill no more, and my son be not destroyed." He said, "As the Lord lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground."

Then the woman said, "Please let your servant speak a word to my lord the king." He said, "Speak." And the woman said, "Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God? For in giving this decision the king convicts himself, inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again. We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. But God will not take away life, and he devises means so that the banished one will not remain an outcast. Now I have come to say this to my lord the king because the people have made me afraid, and your servant thought, 'I will speak to the king; it may be that the king will perform the request of his servant. For the king will hear and deliver his servant from the hand of the man who would destroy me and my son together from the heritage of God.' And your servant thought, 'The word of my lord the king will set me at rest,' for my lord the king is like the angel of God to discern good and evil. The LORD your God be with you!"

Then the king answered the woman, "Do not hide from me anything I ask you." And the woman said, "Let my lord the king speak." The king said, "Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?" The woman answered and said, "As surely as you live, my lord the king, one cannot turn to the right hand or to the left from anything that my lord the king has said. It was your servant Joab who commanded me; it was he who put all these words in the mouth of your servant. In order to change the course of things your servant Joab did this. But my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth."

Then the king said to Joab, "Behold now, I grant this; go, bring back the young man Absalom." And Joab fell on his face to the ground and paid homage and blessed the king. And Joab said, "Today your servant knows that I have found favor in our sight, my lord the king, in that the king has granted the request of his servant." So Joab arose and went to Geshur and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. And the king said, "Let him dwell apart in his own house; he is not to come into my presence." So Absalom lived apart in his own house and did not come into the king's presence.

Now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. 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 (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king's weight. There were born to Absalom three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar. She was a beautiful woman.

So Absalom lived two full years in the Jerusalem, without coming into the king's presence. Then Absalom sent for Joab, to send him to the king, but Joab would not come to him. And he sent a second time, but Joab would not come. Then he said to his servants, "See, Joab's field is next to mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire." So Absalom's servants set the field on fire. Then Joab arose and went to Absalom at his house and said to him, "Why have your servants set my field on fire?" Absalom answered Joab, "Behold, I sent word to you, 'Come here, that I may send you to the king to ask, 'Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still.' Now therefore let me go into the presence of the king, and if there is guilt in me, let him put me to death.'" Then Joab went to the king and told him, and he summoned Absalom. So he came to the king and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom.

So far, God's holy and inerrant Word.

Now last Sunday evening we were looking at the previous chapter — David's dysfunctional family. His son, Amnon, had violated his half-sister Tamar, the full-sister of Absalom, egged on by a cousin, Jonadab. And two years later, Absalom, Tamar's brother, plots the murder of his half-brother, Amnon. And following that, he flees. He flees to Geshur to his grandfather, his mother's father's house, where he would be for three years.

Now three years have passed since the death of Amnon. Absalom is living away. He is hiding in the house of his grandfather. And this chapter, chapter 14, is telling us something about David and his family. It's telling us something about the continual downward spiral of David and his family - the events of David and

Bathsheba, David's adultery, David's complicity in the death of Bathsheba's husband through Joab and through the Ammonites. To all intents and purposes, David had him assassinated. And as a consequence, we see ongoing repercussions in David's life and in David's family life. And two things emerge in this chapter. Two idols emerge. Calvin says in the institutes that "man's mind is a perpetual factory of idols." It's the theme of Tim Keller's book that some of you I know have just been reading and studying - the propensity of man to make an idol, to bow down and worship something other than God. And two of them emerge in this story.

The first is an idol of expediency. It's what David is doing with Absalom. Let's remind ourselves of the events that now transpire. David is going to put family before what is right. He's going to put family before what is just. Joab is David's chief of staff — perhaps Joab still has misgivings about David. Joab was the one, after all, who received the letter which contained the order that Uriah would be killed. Perhaps Joab now has some secret ambition for Absalom. That isn't clear as yet. He sends for a woman from Tekoa. Tekoa is where Amos the prophet comes from. She's a wise woman and Joab, perhaps because a woman would have greater success with David than another prophet like Nathan, Joab puts words in her mouth. She's to tell this tale. She is to pretend that she is a widow and she has two sons and these two sons have been quarreling in the field and one of the sons has killed his brother. And now the clan, the rest of the family, want to execute vengeance on the brother who committed this act of killing and put him to death also. And this woman will be left with no heir.

It's of course a set-up. It's what's happened in David's family. Absalom has killed Amnon. He's killed his half-brother. It's like in part, the story that Nathan told David about the rich man with a party to give and he takes the one lamb of a poor man and sacrifices it for this party. And David was incensed. And David bows to the request of this widow that nothing happen to her son. It's a set-up. Joab has set it up. David eventually sees through the story, the daring story that this woman tells David, and realizes it is Joab. Nathan roused David's conscience against his feelings, but this woman, or Joab, rouses David's feelings against his conscience. Rather than do what is right, rather than do what is just, he yields. I'm going now with the ESV translation here — "The king's heart" verse 1 "went out to Absalom." Absalom should have been brought to trial. Yes, he's David's son, he's family, but he's killed his brother. He should be brought to trial. He should be brought to justice. But David's own conscience isn't right and Joab appeals to his feelings. He appeals to his feelings for his son. He's about to put family before principle. Expediency before what is right.

Of course, Absalom's crime in some ways is worse than David's. Now you may have sympathy with Absalom and you have no sympathy whatsoever with Amnon who was killed. Of course, one understands that, but what Absalom did was wrong. He murdered; he killed his brother. And David, you remember when Amnon did that, what did David do? When Amnon abused his sister, what did

David do? He did nothing. He did absolutely nothing. And here again he hasn't seen Absalom in five years and David is about to put expediency before principle. Absalom is going to return but not because he is repentant. This story, if you look at your bulletin I gave it the title, "The Prodigal Returns," because he is a prodigal and he is returning but that's where the similarity ends with Luke 15. Absalom is not repentant. He returns but he is not repentant. He's actually defiant. Three years away from his father he's had time to brood. We'll see the results of it in the next chapter in the conspiracy. They'll be no party for Absalom. There will be no killing of the fatted calf or the giving of a ring to Absalom. Years have gone by and he's had time to wallow in anger and frustration and bitterness. Clearly, Absalom neither loves nor respects his father. Rather than bring a son to justice, David now bows to expediency.

Now there's an irony in the text. You'll notice this woman says, on two occasions, that David has "the wisdom of an angel." David has the wisdom of an angel to discern between what is right and what is wrong. As you read this tale as the storyteller, as the one who writes 2 Samuel for us to read, as we read this woman saying to David, flattering him indeed, that he has the wisdom of an angel to know what the right thing to do is, but David's wisdom here is not the wisdom of God and it's not the wisdom of an angel. It's the wisdom of expediency. It's the wisdom of a man with a bad conscience. He puts family before principle. What does Proverbs say, in fact it says it twice? "There is a way which seems right to a man, but the end is the ways of death." There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end is the way of death.

There's the idol here of expediency but there's a second idol here in this chapter and it's the idol of beauty before substance. Absalom is committed to return but he's not allowed to come into David's house for a full two years. Verse 24 — "Let him dwell apart in his own house. He is not to come into my presence." And he lives apart. He's not allowed into the court. He's not allowed into the presence of the king. He's not allowed to have any of the benefits of belonging to the king's family. He lives in his own house in Jerusalem for a further two years. He tries to get Joab's attention, and having failed to get Joab's attention, he gets his servants to set Joab's field of barley on fire. That got Joab's attention. And he issues an ultimatum: either receive me or execute me. That's high stakes. I suppose after being in exile for two years in Jerusalem he was pretty safe in thinking David was not about to execute him. A little groveling - at the end of verse 33 he comes into the king and bows himself on his face to the ground before the king. A little groveling and it's all over. It's all done. And perhaps, Absalom might have thought to himself, "Isn't providence a wonderful thing? I mean look at me now. Look at me now. God must be in this."

But you notice what the writer does - in verses 25 and 26 and 27, and it's in a very awkward spot. Just before we're told that "Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem without coming into the king's presence" in verse 28, we're told something about Absalom and perhaps what is most important about Absalom

and why it was that there was such sympathy for Absalom and why it was that even David himself felt sympathetic for Absalom, and it was his beauty. He was one of the most handsome of men in David's time. We're told details about this man's hair. I cannot even imagine what this is! The weight of his hair is ... even when I had hair! (laughter) I can't even imagine that! Do you see what the writer is saying to you? There's a subplot here. Absalom has support now. It's growing support. It will emerge in the next chapter that he has won the hearts of the people. And he's won the hearts of the people initially because of what he looked like. He has beauty but he has no substance.

I remember reading an advertisement in the *Reader's Digest*. There was a farmer from Iowa. He was seeking a wife. And the advertisement went: "Farmer seeks wife. Age 35. Must have tractor. Send picture of tractor." (laughter) He wasn't concerned with what she looked like! The writer is saying something different here. This is 2011. This is *People Magazine* that you see. I know you don't read it. You see it on the stand in Wal-Mart when you're checking out. You look at the front page. You sort of wish that you could turn to the second or third page and not have somebody from First Presbyterian tap you on the shoulder. (laughter) The glossy magazine that says, "Looks are everything. It's all about outward appearance." Do you think this is limited to 3,000 years ago, 1,000 years B.C. in David's time? Look at church advertisements for youth pastors. They must be cool. They must have a certain look. It's politics driven by outward appearance. You know the writer of Samuel has been telling you this way back in 1 Samuel that "man looks on the outward appearance but God looks at the heart." You know if you saw Absalom you'd be won over in a heartbeat. He had everything. He had charm. He had a way with words. He has a wife and sons and a beautiful, beautiful daughter. And guess what he's called her — Tamar, after his sister. We live in an age that's obsessed with beauty. It's a multibillion dollar industry. Man looks at the outward appearance, driven by the external, but God looks at the heart.

You know there's a warning here. Young women, young men, what are you looking for in a husband, in a wife? I sometimes tell students at the seminary who are all astray about their sense of call to the ministry because they married lookers. They didn't marry with a view to the ministry. They didn't marry with a view to being a minister in wherever. They thought they were marrying a doctor. They thought they were marrying a lawyer. They married a looker and they looked at the outward appearance but perhaps they didn't look at the heart. There's a word of warning here. Absalom will win the hearts of the people and perhaps even here you see the seeds of it.

You know this chapter, it's about failure. It's about David's failure. It's about David's failure as a father, to his children, to his sons. He's an absentee father. But you know, the great, great thing is there's Gospel for failures. There's Gospel for people like David. God used David in extraordinary — God is teaching David extraordinary lessons here. God is going to bring him lower still. God's going to

bring David right down because God intends to use him. Do you know, I don't want to send you away depressed tonight. I want to send you away with this thought — God uses failures. This failure God used to write the songbook of the Bible. It's through this failure, according to the flesh, that Jesus Christ came. That's beautiful. That's beauty. That's the beauty of the heart of God, that He looks upon people like David, yes like me and like you, and He says, "I love you. I send My Son for you to bring you into My family and into My household and into My kingdom." Yeah, there's failure in this chapter, but there's Gospel in this chapter too, because God doesn't use the successful and even in Absalom's case the beautiful, but He takes the weak things and the despised things and He turns them into something that's far more beautiful and far more glorious. That's the kind of God that we have.

Let's pray together.

Father we thank You for Your Word and as we see it now in the life of David we ask that You would hide this word in our own hearts and give us hope and give us grace and give us courage, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).