

With Children Like These...

Romans 5:8-11

2 Samuel 3-18

September 19, 2010

Sermon preached by

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Bellefontaine, Ohio

Now, let's be honest about it, shall we? Sometimes our children are a blessing...and sometimes they are NOT! Sometimes they are a real gift from God, enriching our lives beyond our wildest imaginings...while at other times, our children can be a royal pain in the you-know-where. I imagine those of you who are parents know exactly what I mean.

Well, the very same thing was true for King David long ago...although for David, it was all magnified a thousand fold. What was David's greatest blessing also proved to be his worst nightmare. David, of course, never saw it that way. To his credit...as well as his detriment perhaps, David always seemed blind to his children's faults and foibles. But for those of us who are reading the story many centuries later...as well as for many of those who lived through the events when they were happening...David needed to pay a little LESS attention to Dr. Spock's permissive parenting and little MORE attention to Benjamin Franklin's old adage "*Spare the rod, spoil the child!*"

Plain and simple, David children were OUT OF CONTROL and put David through little less than "hell on earth." For David, it was a clear cut case of *with children like these...who needs enemies!* But then, that's exactly what the Prophet Nathan had PREDICTED would happen:

The sword will never depart from your house. Your children will rise up against you and constant trouble will plague your family.

And boy was Nathan right! But then, I guess when you've got 20 sons and one daughter by eight different wives and who knows how many concubines, it's impossible NOT to have a house full of problems.

The story, of course is told in the 13th through the 18th chapters of 2nd Samuel and I would encourage you to read it in all its gory detail. I'll share the basics of the story with you shortly. But first, let's join together to hear the word of God as it comes to us from the 5th Chapter of Romans, the 8-11th Verses.

Song "I Love Your Word, O Lord"

Prayer for Guidance

Now, I hope you're not the squeamish type...or faint of heart, either. Because what we're going to talk about today...for the next few minutes...is nasty...NASTY BUSINESS! It's a story of unbridled lust...blind ambition...treacherous rebellion...and cold-blooded murder. And it is NASTY business indeed!

I never cease to be amazed at the number of people who think that the Bible contains nothing but a bunch of namby-pamby do's and don'ts, sentimental religious poetry and a lot of ho-hum boring material. Because nothing could be further from the truth. If people would only take the book off the shelf and READ it every now and then, they would discover what a collection of wild and wooly tales it really contains. And, in the process, they might just run smack dab into God Almighty, himself...or herself, whichever the case may be! But then, come to think of it, maybe that's the reason people DON'T read the Bible. It's too risky!

But let's get on with our story for this morning. It's another of the David saga of stories we've been considering for the last several weeks! As always, some background information is required.

David, Israel's most illustrious king, is nearing the end of his reign. He was, as the Bible says, "*a man after God's own heart!*" and had accomplished great things over the course of his reign...uniting the 12 tribes of Israel into a unified and powerful nation...winning brilliant victories over Israel's enemies...making Jerusalem his capital city...a city dedicated to the glory of the Lord God of Israel. But for all his successes, David had a problem: His lust for women...which finally got him into hot water he couldn't get out of. David sinned by taking another man's wife and then having that man killed to cover over his crime. But then God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David and announce to him that though the Lord would FORGIVE David for his sin, there would still be CONSEQUENCES to pay...not the least of which would be rebellion and anarchy within David's own household. And no sooner had Nathan announce that punishment than did the trouble begin.

David's eldest son and apparent heir to the throne was named Amnon. And he, like his father, had a passion for beautiful women. The problem was, however, that the beautiful woman he set his sights on was none other than his half-sister Tamar, whom the Bible describes as "beautiful beyond compare."

Well, Amnon fell head over heels in love with her...or perhaps we should say "in lust" with her. Putting it simply, Amnon was BESIDE himself with desire for Tamar. The Bible's exact words are these: "*Amnon was so tormented that he made himself SICK because of his sister Tamar.*" But, as is often the case, it's the old, old story of unrequited love. Tamar would have nothing to do with Amnon. He was, after all, her half-BROTHER!

Now, that would have been the end of it and it could have all be written off a case of extreme infatuation had it not been for a shifty character by the name of Jonadab who was Amnon's so-called "friend." The Bible, with its typical understatement, describes Jonadab as "*a very crafty man.*" So here's what happens. Jonadab suggests to Amnon a way for Amnon to be alone with the beautiful Tamar: "*Go to bed and pretend that you are sick and then ask for Tamar to come and take care of you and when she does... well... you can... hee hee... you can... um... ah... grab her and do what comes naturally!*"

Well, when Tamar comes to take care of her supposedly sick half-brother Amnon, he doesn't grab her...at least not right away. Instead, he foolishly invites her into bed with him, and when she refuses, THEN he grabs her and forces himself upon her. "*No! Please don't do this,*" she cried out. "*It's awful... disgraceful! How will I ever be able to hold my head up in public again? And you... you will disgrace yourself in all of Israel.*"

But Amnon ignored her pleas and since he was stronger than she was, he over-powered her and took advantage of her. And then the scripture tells us that afterwards, Amnon felt guilty and was filled with deep hatred for Tamar. He now HATED her more than he had previously loved her. "*GET OUT! Get out of my sight!*" he screamed at her, throwing her out of his room and locking the door behind her.

Shamed and disgraced by her half-brother, Tamar is found sobbing by her full brother Absalom, another of David's sons. "*Has your brother Amnon molested you? Absalom asked her. Don't tell anyone about it for he is your half-brother and I will take care of him.*" So Tamar lived in Absalom's house, sad and lonely. (2 Sam. 13:20-22)

Now, when David, the King, the father of them all, heard about what had happened, he was FURIOUS...but he did NOTHING about it. He REFUSED to act. Amnon, after all, was his eldest son and he loved him. Which left it to Absalom to revenge his sister's honor. And Absalom seethed with rage. For two YEARS Absalom seethed with rage. And then he hatched his plan to take revenge on Amnon.

Absalom would throw a feast to celebrate the sheering of the sheep and invite all of his brothers and half-brothers to join him. At first, King David was reluctant to allow Amnon to be including, remembering that Absalom was furious with him. But when Absalom kept insisting that ALL the rest of his brothers would be there and Amnon should be included too, David finally relented and gave his permission. So Absalom said to his servants, "*When Amnon has had too much to drink, I will give the order for you to run in and kill him. Don't be afraid! I will take responsibility!*"

So when Amnon had put away enough wine and was swapping off-color jokes with his brothers in the corner, Absalom gave the signal. His men rushed in and struck the unsuspecting Amnon down in cold blood...surprising not only Amnon, but the rest of the brothers as well. But then, as one of the bystanders said, *"Well, you SHOULDNT have been surprised! You could tell even by LOOKING at Absalom that he had made up his mind to do this from the time that Amnon raped his sister Tamar!"* So Absalom fled from Jerusalem and sought refuge with the King of Geshur, where he remained three years. And then the scripture tells us that King David mourned a long time for his first-born son, Amnon. But when he got over Amnon's death, he then began to long for his son Absalom.

Now, at first glance, it would appear that Absalom had committed a very foolish and costly act by murdering his brother Amnon. But if you look at it from Absalom's perspective, bumping off Amnon had accomplished several things. First he had, rightly or wrongly, defended his sister's honor. He had avenged the DISHONOR that had been done to her. And eventually, even King David seems to have come around to seeing it that way.

Over and above avenging his sister's rape, however, Absalom also accomplished a second, and even MORE significant objective by getting rid of Amnon. For in eliminating David's eldest son, just GUESS who was next in line for the throne! What's more, by committing the murder in such blatant fashion...right smack dab in front of God and everybody...ESPECIALLY in front of his brothers... Absalom gave the very unmistakable message: *"Don't even THINK about messing with ME, bros!"*

Now, one of the other things you need to know was that not only was Absalom cold and calculating, tough and ruthless, he was also incredibly good looking...AND VAIN! *"There was no one in all of Israel as famous for his good looks as Absalom,"* the story tells us, *"for he had no defect from head to toe. What's more, his hair was very thick, and he had to cut it once a year when it grew too long. And he would weigh it and it would weigh about five pounds according to the royal standards."* (2 Sam. 14:25-26)

Now, I ask you, who in the WORLD weighs their hair when they have it cut...EXCEPT someone who is incredibly vain and full of himself?!?! And it was precisely that conceit that eventually led him to think that everyone in the Kingdom of Israel loved him and would support him when he rebelled against his father...the King! And yet, once again, it wasn't a rash act of rebellion...at least not initially...but a well thought out, cold and calculated move that took several years to implement. Absalom was patient if he was nothing else. The first step was getting his father, King David, to welcome him back to Jerusalem...which David gladly did. Absalom bowed dutifully before his father...and his father welcomed him home with a kiss.

But then, you see, Absalom decided to outfit himself with a horse and chariot and an armed guard of 50 men. Self-important men are always surrounded by armed guards, aren't they?! And then Absalom would go early every morning to the city gate where he would greet every man who had a case to bring before the King for judgment. The king in those days, you see, was not only the ruler of the nation, he was also the chief and only justice of the Supreme Court, deciding matters as important as who would govern which province and as trivial as which neighbor the stray cat belonged to.

Well, Absalom offered to intercede in those cases on behalf of those seeking justice and thereby won their support and favor. Or as the scripture tells us, *"By behaving like this, he befriended all of Israel and stole the affection of the Israelites."* Oh, Absalom was a shrewd character all right. Right under the King's nose...right in front of his unsuspecting father...Absalom won the loyalty of the people. But then came the ugliest part. The Bible tells us that Absalom went to his father and asked for permission to pay a visit to the holy shire at Hebron. And you can well imagine DAVID'S reaction, *"At LAST! FINALLY my son wants to get right with God! Praise the Lord!"* So OF COURSE, King David gladly granted Absalom's request.

Absalom, however, had NO INTENTION of going to Hebron to worship at the holy shrine. He had entirely OTHER purposes in mind. But in order to know that, you'd need to know that Hebron was the place where DAVID had been crowned king...and Saul before him. It was the place where Israel's kings ascended to the throne. Which is EXACTLY what Absalom planned to do...declaring HIMSELF to be king in open rebellion against his father.

Well, Absalom quickly won the support of a vast majority of the Israelites who had been MESMERIZED by the charismatic, suave, dashing handsome, debonair and DECISIVE Absalom. And his father, David, the King, was forced to quickly flee into exile with only a handful of supporters in tow. But that is also precisely the point in which we see the depths of Absalom's depravity. In his lust for power...and his blind ambition to do whatever it took to GET power...he became perfectly willing to hunt his father down like an animal. Absalom, it would seem, is one of those rare individuals who is utterly without any redeeming features – except, of course, his physical good looks. And so he sent his soldiers out in pursuit of his father David, to finish the old man off once and for all.

And yet, in that very decision came Absalom's undoing. For he forgot, you see, that David made his reputation as a warrior-king par excellence!. David is, you will remember, quite used to a whole host of folks trying to do him in...everyone from Goliath to Saul to the armies of the surrounding nations that Israel was constantly fighting. And so the battle lines were drawn...Absalom on one side with his superior numbers...and David on the other with his seasoned soldiers under the command of an extremely capable general named Joab, who despised the arrogant upstart Absalom. You see, Absalom and Joab had had several run-ins on previous occasions and one in particular in which Absalom had had Joab's barley field set on fire simply because Joab refused to intercede on his behalf before the King. So to be sure, Joab had little love lost for this traitor-son of his beloved king.

Well, on the eve of the crucial battle, King David was a WRECK. If he was afraid he might lose his throne, he was even MORE afraid he might lose his son, Absalom. The boy was a thorn in his flesh, to be sure. But he was ALSO the apple of his eye. So before the fighting started, he made it clear to his general, in no uncertain terms, that not a hair on Absalom's beautiful head was to be harmed. The general promised, of course, but old Joab, remembering what had happened to his barley fields, must have had his fingers crossed behind his back.

During the battle, Absalom's forces were soundly and roundly defeated, despite their superior numbers. And Absalom, seeing the way things were going, decided that saving his own handsome head was the better part of wisdom and beat a hasty, if not cowardly retreat on the back of his trusty steed. But that's precisely when a strange twist of fate became Absalom's ultimate undoing. For you see, in the panic of the battle raging around him, Absalom's beast ran under a tree with huge, low-hanging branches. And those branches seemed to almost come to life and reach out and catch hold of Absalom...some translations of the Bible say by his head...while other's say by his HAIR...that beautiful head of hair of his that was his pride and joy...such that Absalom was left hanging there in the tree, kicking and screaming for dear life and utterly vulnerable to David's forces.

They find him, of course, and report the situation to Joab, who despite his promise to the King not to harm a hair on Absalom's beautiful head, decides to get rid of this milestone around David's neck once and for all. And in a scene that ranks as one of the Bible's most horrible, Joab thrusts not one...not two...but THREE spears through Absalom's chest as he hangs there in the tree...and then...and THEN allows his soldiers to run him through with their swords time and time again until his body no longer kicks in a frenzy but simply twitches a time or two in its death throes...and then hangs there still...swaying to and fro...to and fro...still caught there by his beautiful head of hair hung up in that tree.

And so ends the story of Absalom. And so his treachery is rewarded. And so does God PUNISH the wicked...ESPECIALLY those who mess with the Lord's anointed. And all of this, we suppose, is why the story of Absalom get included in the Bible -- in order to teach us not to rebel against God OR God's anointed. For why else would the Bible contain such a disastrous and gruesome story?

But if that's what we think this chapter of David's life is all about...the perils of rebellion against God and God's anointed...then we have completely missed the story's point. Contrary to what most people think, the Bible ISN'T intended to give us a few simple moral lessons on right and wrong...good and evil...obedience and rebellion. The Bible is intended to tell us about GOD...and about God's remarkable, shocking, and sometimes even incredible ways.

Because, you see, Absalom's story doesn't end with his limp, lifeless body still hanging by his beautiful hair in the tree. It ends with what happens AFTERWARDS. For the scene quickly shifts

back to Jerusalem where David, father first and king second, is anxiously awaiting news of the battle, to be sure! But more importantly, he is awaiting news of his son, Absalom. David had wanted to lead his troops into battle...mostly, I'm think, to try and protect Absalom. But his general had persuaded him to remain behind the battle lines. And so now, David is waiting for news...torn by fears, doubts and hopes.

As the first messenger arrives with news of the battle, David's concern is not with how the battle went, but with how his son Absalom fared. *"Is it well with the young man Absalom? Is he alright?"* David asks. To which the messenger feebly replies, *"Well...ugh...umm...I...I really don't know, sir. There was such confusion, I...I...I really couldn't tell."* And about that time, as if to get the first messenger off the hook, a second messenger arrives with news of the great victory. But again, David's first concern is not for the battle, but for Absalom. *"Is the young man Absalom alright?"* And this time, the messenger pulls no punches, but gives it to the king straight up. *"May all the king's enemies and all those who rebel against you be as the young man Absalom now is. He is DEAD, Sir!"*

And when he broke the news to the King, it absolutely broke David's heart. It's just as simple as that. And David cried out in words that have echoed down through the centuries ever since.

"Oh Absalom, my son, my son! Oh my son, Absalom!

Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

No, I can't make sense of it either – the King mourning a son who killed his brother, stole the loyalty of the people, plotted treacherous rebellion and would have killed his own father had he been given the chance. It is SHOCKING, to say the least, to see the depths of David's grief. But as one particularly astute writer has so beautifully put it:

David meant what he said, of course. If he could have done the boy's dying for him, he would have done it. If he could have paid the price for the boy's betrayal of him, he would have paid it. If he could have given his own life to make the boy alive again, he would have given it. But even a king can't do things like that. As later history was to prove, that takes a God! (Fredrick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures, p. 6)

It takes a GOD. And THAT, my friends, is what is at the heart of the Absalom story. For the story reaches its climax many centuries later in Israel's history...with another son hanging from a tree. But OH! what a difference! What put THIS son on the tree was not only human sin, but also, and even MORE so, the redeeming, forgiving love of the One who GAVE his son...his only begotten Son...that whosoever believes in him shall NOT perish but have eternal life.

THIS son's name, of course, was JESUS...the one we call "The Christ"...our Savior and Lord. And he died there on his tree for the BEST of us...and the WORST of us...even...had he only known it...even for the likes of a rebellious son named Absalom.

"O Absalom, my son, my son! O my son Absalom!"

Would that I had died in your place, my son, my son! O my son, Absalom!"

This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son.. And this is WHY: so that no one (including the likes of a wretch like Absalom) might be destroyed. By believing in Him, anyone and everyone can have a whole and lasting life. You see, God didn't go to the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger at the Absaloms of the world, telling us how rotten and awful we are. He came instead to put us right with God again! (John 3:16-17, The Message)

Which leaves, of course, only one more thing to be saved:

To GOD be the glory...great things He has done!

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