

## Week 25: David's Son's Rebellion: Absalom

### Hook



**Main Point: A godly leader doesn't usurp authority; it is given rightfully.**

Have you ever had a houseguest overstay his or her welcome? As frustrating as that might be, now imagine that the guest was not invited and now has potential legal backing to remain in your home. A *squatter* is someone who settles in or occupies a property but has no legal claim to it.<sup>1</sup> Those who take occupancy of a vacant piece of property for a consistent period may establish a stronger claim to the property than the actual owners.<sup>2</sup> "Squatters' rights," also known as adverse possession, are aimed at preventing vigilante justice, removing the option of landowners from simply using force to remove unwanted occupants from unattended property. And so, property owners must go through the proper legal channels and evict a squatter, within a state's mandated period, to remove them. If the owner fails, the legal title might go to the squatter who has taken possession.<sup>3</sup>

For a squatter to make a legal claim in Texas, he must first meet five criteria:

1. Make an occupancy claim to the land.
2. Treat the property like his own.
3. Live there continuously for at least 10 years.
4. Possess the land or building exclusively.
5. Make it obvious to the general public that he is living there.<sup>4</sup>

**Q: As a property owner, how would you feel if you discovered someone were squatting in a home that you own?**

**Q: What might lead to someone's viewing a particular home as a target for squatting?**

**Q: In what other areas of our culture do you find people attempting to enjoy privileges without earning them?**

Today's story will explore the tragedy of Absalom, David's son who attempted to take authority that had been given to his father.

**RECAP:** Now we've entered the final period of David's life (lessons 23–31), when David committed his great sin, and we'll see the fallout and consequences of that. This week, we'll look at how David's lack of properly handling Amnon's sin against Tamar led to a strained relationship with his son, Absalom (Tamar's full brother), who conspired to take over the throne. Though David authentically repented of his great sin, that brokenness continued to affect the next generation. This section of David's story ends with his daughter abused and humiliated, his oldest sons dead, and David weeping in turmoil. But God would eventually redeem this brokenness with a future son of David, even one born from his relationship with Bathsheba.

## **Week 25: David's Son's Rebellion: Absalom**

### **Book**

**Main Point: A godly leader doesn't usurp authority; it is given rightfully.**

**2 Samuel 15:1–12 and go back and read 14:25–27 [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** Godly people trust in God's will instead of doing whatever they want.

**Q: How did Absalom steal the hearts of the people of Israel from David?**

**Q: What do Absalom's lies about making a vow to God say about his faith?**

Reading in context is important to every story in Scripture, but especially this one where remembering what came before really helps us understand Absalom's motivations. Absalom was David's third oldest son. Amnon, the oldest and heir to the throne, sexually assaulted his half-sister Tamar (Absalom's full sister), so Absalom killed him. David's second son is listed as Daniel, but he never played a role in any of these stories, so most scholars believe he died before any of these events happened. This left Absalom as the oldest son of David and would-be heir to the throne (2 Samuel 13).<sup>5</sup> However, when Absalom killed Amnon, he fled to Geshur, where his mother's father was king, for fear that David would retaliate against him. Absalom was in Geshur for three years. David longed to go out to him but never did until Joab used a wise woman to convince David to bring Absalom back. David did send for him to return to Jerusalem, but he set up a boundary. Absalom was to live in his own house and not come into David's presence (2 Samuel 14).

At this point, the story chooses to tell us that there was no man in Israel as handsome as Absalom. It gives us a detail that seems strange in our culture, that he would cut his hair once a year and weigh it. But in the ancient world, long hair was a great ornament, considered a sign of strength, virility, and prowess. His measuring it indicates that it was a source of public pride for Absalom.<sup>6</sup> The text tells us that in his whole body there was "no blemish." This phrase is significant because it was used of sacrificial animals. They had to be perfect to be sacrificed (Leviticus 22:20). Therefore, it was also used of Jesus, referring not to His physical body but His sinlessness (1 Peter 1:19). But when this phrase is used of Absalom, it refers only to his physical appearance, not his character. This stands in stark contrast to all the references to David's heart or inner person. Absalom looked perfect on the outside, but his inside was not right with God – the exact opposite of what God told Samuel to look for when choosing David. "Do not look on his outward appearance ... the Lord looks on the heart [inner person]" (1 Samuel 16:7). Right away, the story tells us that Absalom was not a man after God's own heart.

The story also tells us that Absalom had three sons, who are not named,<sup>7</sup> and a daughter named Tamar (no doubt in honor of his sister), who was also described as a beautiful woman. This would have stuck out to any ancient reader because in typical

ancient genealogies, sons are named and daughters are not. This is an intentional reminder of the story of Tamar as well as Absalom's strong feelings about it.

These details serve to set up the story of Absalom's rebellion. Absalom was invited back to Jerusalem but not allowed in David's presence. This parallels how God handled Cain's killing of his brother, Abel. Though God spared his life, Cain lived away from the presence of the Lord (Genesis 4:16). David's banning Absalom from his presence wasn't about not wanting to see him. It made a statement about his place in the royal family. He could come back to Israel and be part of the community, but he would have no place in David's house. He had lost his claim to the throne. Even when they saw each other two years later, David kissed him in personal reconciliation but didn't restore him to his place in the palace or the royal line.<sup>8</sup>

So, Absalom tried to take the throne away. First, he got a chariot, horses and 50 men to "run before him" (15:1). This was not an army; it was royal pomp – the first time a royal in Israel had done something like this for show, perhaps something he learned from his grandfather, the king of Geshur.<sup>9</sup> Second, Absalom would stand beside the city gate in the path of the people who came to Jerusalem to ask David to judge their disputes. People coming before the king might have to wait a long time to get an audience with him, but Absalom made a personal connection right away and listened to their story. He told them that they were surely right, and if he were judge (king), he would give them justice, intentionally turning their hearts to him and away from David.

Then Absalom even used faith as a smokescreen in his scheming. He told David he was going to Hebron (his birthplace) to fulfill a vow he had made to the Lord. This was strange because vows were sacrifices, which were offered at the tabernacle in Jerusalem (Leviticus 7:16). Also, if he really had made a vow to the Lord, it would be strange that he waited four years to fulfill it (Deuteronomy 23:21). And Hebron was where David had first been crowned king over just Judah and reigned for more than seven years before becoming king over all of Israel and making Jerusalem his capital (2 Samuel 5:1). David should have realized something fishy was going on.<sup>10</sup>

But he didn't. And Absalom went to Hebron, gathered a following, including one of David's counselors, Ahithophel, and secretly spread the word through *all of Israel* that he would be declared king at Hebron. Absalom wasn't trying to be king over just Judah, he wanted the whole nation. As David's popularity had kept growing while Saul was king, Absalom's popularity with the people grew. But David hadn't tried to steal the throne from Saul. In fact, he refused to lift his hand against Saul, and even after Saul was dead, he waited and inquired of the Lord before he took any action to claim the throne, even though Samuel had anointed him as king more than a decade earlier.

But Absalom's heart was different. He was angry about his sister's abuse and David's lack of response. And he was prideful and believed he would make a better king. But instead of trying to convince his father to let him back into what he believed was his rightful place, he opted to lead a rebellion using a false vow to God in his scheme. This is

not the heart of someone who loves God and trusts His will. Absalom's behavior while David was king is a stark contrast to David's behavior when Saul was king. Absalom tried to take the throne by force. David had waited and trusted in God's will and His timing, even though he knew God had rejected Saul as king.

**Q: Describe a time when you tried to take something you thought you deserved instead of trusting God's will for you. What happened as a result?**

**Q: How have you experienced brokenness in your family relationships? What steps can you take toward forgiveness and reconciliation?**

**2 Samuel 15:13–16; 15:24–26; 16:7–13 and Psalm 3 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** Godly people leave it to the Lord to judge their righteousness.

**Q: Why didn't David take the ark with him? Why did he let Shimei curse him?**

**Q: How does Psalm 3 show David's trust in the Lord?**

This is a long section, but here's a summary of what happens:

- David, weeping, fled Jerusalem with all those who were loyal to him.
- He left the ark, trusting that if the Lord wanted, He would bring David back.
- David sent Hushai back to Jerusalem to be his spy in Absalom's house.
- Mephibosheth stayed in Jerusalem, thinking God was giving him back Saul's kingdom.
- Shimei of the house of Saul cursed David as they left Jerusalem.

At first glance, it may seem as if David were fleeing Jerusalem out of fear. He does say that Absalom's army was strong and would overtake them quickly (15:14). But the more we read, the more we see that David was fleeing to let God decide between him and Absalom. He told the Levites to take the ark of the covenant back to Jerusalem where it belonged, and if God wanted him to be king, He would bring David back to the ark (15:25–26). When Shimei cursed him and Abishai wanted to kill Shimei, David said maybe God had told him to curse him. If not, God would repay him with good for this evil done to him (16:7–13). David realized he had made many mistakes. He was not "without blemish" in character. He would let the Lord decide between him and Absalom.

In Psalm 3, David explicitly said he was trusting God to deliver him. God was his shield and his glory. The Lord answered him when he cried out and sustained him through every day. Though Absalom's army was strong, and David's many enemies assailed him on every side (not just Absalom, but Saul's house too, including Mephibosheth, to whom he had shown the lovingkindness of the Lord), David said, "I will not fear" (v. 6). David had every reason to fear, but he was fleeing out of trust (putting his fate into God's hands), not fear.

**Q: What did David learn by having to trust in God alone to be His deliverance?**

**Q: In what ways do you struggle with living by fear instead of trust? How is God calling you to put your fate in His hands?**

**2 Samuel 16:20–23; 17:1–14; 18:1–15; 18:33 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** Godly people still love even when there has been brokenness.

**Q: What does it say about David that he mourned for Absalom?**

Again, this is a long passage, which we can summarize:

- Absalom slept with David’s concubines as a message that he was taking David’s place.
- Ahithophel wanted to pursue David that night, but Hushai said to wait until the next day.
- Absalom chose Hushai’s advice; Ahithophel killed himself.
- David went into battle but asked his army not to hurt Absalom.
- David’s army won; Joab intentionally killed Absalom; David mourned Absalom.

Absalom had conflicting advisors, both of whom originally advised David. Ahithophel had defected to Absalom’s side early on. But when David fled, he sent his advisor, Hushai, back to Absalom to pretend to join him while he spied for David. The story tells us that both David and Absalom listened to Ahithophel’s advice as if it were the word of God (16:23). This doesn’t mean he was a prophet speaking God’s Word, just that they respected his counsel *as much as* if it were God’s Word. But he didn’t always advise godly things. The first thing he told Absalom to do was to sleep with David’s concubines, a common practice in the ancient world, to make a statement that he was usurping his father’s place. But it was certainly not something God would command. In fact, Reuben was cursed for doing it to Jacob/Israel (Genesis 49:4). But when Ahithophel advised Absalom to pursue David right away, when he was tired, God ordained for him to reject Ahithophel’s advice and listen instead to Hushai, who intentionally gave him bad advice, which led to his losing the battle to David (17:1–14). So David was right; the Lord decided between him and Absalom.

David knew he would have to fight Absalom’s army, but he asked his men to deal gently with his son. Maybe he felt guilty for all that had happened or maybe it was just fatherly love, but he had mercy on his son even while he was betraying David. But Joab did not listen. He killed Absalom and buried him dishonorably – in a pit covered with rocks, fulfilling the law that a rebellious son be stoned (Deuteronomy 21:21). He was not buried in the family tomb. His burial place was even outside the promised land, east of the Jordan River. Both times David heard the good news that he had won the battle, he immediately asked if Absalom was well. When he heard that Absalom was dead, he was “deeply moved” or more literally, he “quaked or trembled with turmoil.”<sup>11</sup>

There had been much devastation with Amnon, Tamar and Absalom, and then more brokenness with Absalom. David knew he hadn't handled everything right, but he did his best to trust God in this battle, praying that the Lord would choose between him and his son. But then when the Lord chose him, he felt despair and turmoil. Though David had repented, the consequences of his sins ran deep and long in his family. He wept over this lost son just as he had wept over Amnon and the infant son he had lost with Bathsheba. So much loss, so much pain. Though God had promised a Messiah from David's line, neither of his oldest sons were the one. But God would redeem David's sin by choosing another of his sons as king, the son of Bathsheba. God can redeem even the most broken of situations, even if the brokenness is caused by our own sin.

**Q: How has God redeemed broken situations and relationships in your life?**

**Q: How can we continue to love those who have caused us pain while keeping appropriate boundaries to guard ourselves from abuse? What does it look like, practically, to love our enemies in a healthy way?**

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### **Took**

**Main Point: Godly leaders do not usurp authority; it is given rightfully.**

David is in despair. His own son had attempted to usurp his authority, pursued David, and it eventually cost the younger man his life. Now what does David do? Psalm 3 paints the picture of a man who is completely dependent on the Lord to see him through each moment:

- <sup>3</sup>But you, O Lord, are a shield about me,  
my glory, and the lifter of my head.
- <sup>4</sup>I cried aloud to the LORD,  
and he answered me from his holy hill. *Selah*
- <sup>5</sup>I lay down and slept;  
I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.
- <sup>6</sup>I will not be afraid of many thousands of people  
who have set themselves against me all around.

David acknowledged that he needed the Lord to get him through the night. Seek the Lord in seasons of calamity; the counsel of friends and experts may be helpful, but God is the One who is your shield and sustainer.

**Q: What passages have given you strength during seasons of loss or turmoil?**

**Q: From where did David gain confidence (v. 6)?**

**Q: In what ways did your prayer life change during difficult times?**

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** Reflect on times when you have experienced brokenness in relationships with friends, family or others. What caused it? What did you do or try to do to repair it? How did God redeem or repair the relationship? If the brokenness is ongoing, what steps can you take to repair it? Is there ever a relationship that is beyond repair? If so, how and why? If not, why not?

**PRAY** for God to reveal to you any ways that you have been trying to do things on your own or follow your own plan instead of trusting Him. Ask Him for the wisdom, strength and patience to wait on His plans. Pray for His guidance, that He would make His will

clear to you. Pray for God to give you a heart “like Jesus’ heart.” Read Psalm 3 aloud as a prayer of putting your trust in the Lord to deliver you and guide you.

**ACT:** Go for a nature walk, as fast or as slow or as short or as long as your body will allow. As you walk, think about what it means to walk in God’s ways, follow Christ, and trust His will for your life instead of taking your own path. As you walk, thank God that He does reveal His will to us and ask Him to reveal His will to you.

**NEXT TIME in *The Life of David*:** Next week, we’ll see David return to the throne, along with all the tribes who were loyal to him, until Sheba, a Benjaminite (the tribe of Saul), rebels against him. Later, another son, Adonijah, would set himself up as king, too. This issue of people rebelling against him and trying to take the throne would never end for David. But we will see David continue to follow God, worship Him, and look to Him as his refuge and strength for the rest of his days until he passes the throne to his son, Solomon. Though David was far from perfect, his heart was committed to following God.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/squatter.asp>

<sup>2</sup> <https://andersonadvisors.com/squatters-rights/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://andersonadvisors.com/squatters-rights/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://bighamassociates.com/squatters-rights-texas/>

<sup>5</sup> Avner Falk, *A Psychoanalytic History of the Jews* (Hackensack, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Scholars believe they were not named because they died young. This is consistent with Absalom’s statement in 18:18, that he had no son to carry on his name.

<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *1–2 Samuel, The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Charles J. Ellicott, ed., *An Old Testament Commentary for English Readers* (London, UK: Cassell, Petter, Galpin, and Co., 1882).

<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *1–2 Samuel, The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> *The NAS Exhaustive Concordance with Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1981).