

DAVID'S UNDISCIPLINED SONS

Teaching-Learning Resources

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Background Scripture: 2 Samuel 13:23–15:12; 18

Key Passage: 2 Samuel 14:21–28; 1 Kings 1:5–6

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This is the third lesson in Part I, “Major Decisions in a Nation’s Beginning,” in the thirteen-week study of “The Kingdom and the Early Prophets: God’s Call to Responsible Decision.” In the two previous lessons we have examined significant decisions made in early Israel on such religious-political issues as holy war, the establishment of the monarchy, and regicide (the killing of the Lord’s anointed). But not all of Israel’s major decisions in the beginning were political in nature.

We interrupt our study of national political decisions to examine some domestic decisions. Crucial decisions were made at the family level which affected the destiny of the nation. Decisions made between parents and children reflected religious and personal priorities in early Israel. The present study on “David’s Undisciplined Sons” will permit us to observe interpersonal relationships in David’s family which can provide certain guidelines as we make domestic decisions in our own Christian homes.

The Biblical Setting

Two significant facts must be kept in mind when studying David’s domestic life: he was a man of war, and he was a man of love. He was the victim of both love and war. The

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Scriptures record that David had seven wives (1 Chronicles 3:1–51 and at least ten mistresses (2 Samuel 12:8; 15:16). These were not “political marriages,” for he fathered at least one child by each wife, having nineteen sons by his wives, plus an unspecified number of sons by his mistresses. The only daughter mentioned was Tamar, the sister of Absalom, who came to notoriety because of her seduction by Amnon, her half brother. Undoubtedly David was the father of other daughters, but ancient Israel, where polygamy was accepted, was a male-oriented society which did not keep adequate birth records of infant girls.

David’s successful career as Israel’s empire builder cost him greatly. Not only was he prohibited from building the temple of the Lord because he had shed so much blood (1 Chronicles 28:2–3), but also he was unable to function as a caring father. With nearly twenty wives and concubines and perhaps as many as forty sons and daughters, David could do little more than make token visits to his children when he was home from the “fighting front.”

Since the monarchy was new in Israel, precedents had not been established for responsible norms of behavior for the younger members of the royal family. David’s predecessor, Saul, had only two wives, two daughters, and six sons; and there is no hint in the biblical record of domestic problems in Saul’s family except for the tension between Saul and Jonathan over David’s fate. In Saul’s family the eldest son functioned as a healthy adviser to an emotionally disturbed father. Jonathan’s love for David was never at his father’s expense. But whereas Saul was plagued with personal problems, David was sickened by family troubles.

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No doubt many of David's problems could have been predicted in light of his decision for multiple marriages. But some of the domestic turmoil was unpredictable. David's firstborn son, Amnon, theoretically was the most likely candidate to become David's heir to the throne. Generally the eldest son received greater advantages along with his greater responsibilities. But Amnon brought shame to his family with an act which ultimately cost him not only any claim to the throne but also his very life.

Amnon fell in love with his half sister, Tamar, and decided to seduce her. With the consent of their father, David, he could have married her as she proposed: "I pray you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you" (2 Samuel 13:13). But Amnon rejected Tamar's offer of marriage, deciding instead to attack her. His love was no more than uncontrolled passion; and his passion changed quickly from unquenchable love to violent hate: "Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her" (13:17). Amnon's attack on Tamar was as devastating to David's family as were David's military attacks to Israel's neighbors.

When David learned of Amnon's deed, he became angry—just plain angry. But he did nothing to punish Amnon or to help and comfort the violated Tamar. One must note the contrast between David and his predecessor, Saul. Saul was willing to kill his son Jonathan for having eaten some honey unlawfully, but David was unwilling to punish his eldest son for the rape of his own daughter.

David may have been immobilized by guilt and fear. David's own murderous affair with Bathsheba had put him in an impossible position. "Like father, like son!" What else could he say or do? But if Amnon's passion reminded him of

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his own passion, he was also likely [page 31] to remember the warning of the prophet Nathan, which came as a result of that passion: “. . . the sword shall never depart from your house. . . . I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. . . .” (2 Samuel 12:10–11).

Tamar’s brother, Absalom, the third son of David, decided that Amnon would die for the offense against his sister. Unlike his father, he did not lose his temper; rather, he seethed in polite silence, biding his time. Two years later Absalom’s simmering passion of hate erupted in a decision to kill. He ordered the slaying of his half brother at a sheep-shearing festival. With that decision the words of the prophet Nathan were fulfilled: “The sword shall never depart from your own house.” David’s domestic troubles had escalated so that his anger was replaced by grief, and eventually grief would be followed by loneliness, only to be followed by more grief.

David’s decision on how to respond to Absalom’s crime was difficult. Were he to respond with the law of retaliation, “an eye for an eye,” he could execute Absalom, but then two of his Sons would be dead. (This was a real option, for even though Absalom had fled to Geshur. David could have arranged for his extradition.) But David decided otherwise; he decided just to wait. For three years Absalom remained in exile until Joab, David’s military commander and nephew, maneuvered to facilitate a reconciliation between David and Absalom. But seven long years passed between the time of Tamar’s seduction and Absalom’s reconciliation with his father.

David’s loneliness during Absalom’s exile was mild compared to the humiliation and grief Absalom was soon to cause. Whereas David had grown lonely over the years, Absalom

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had turned bitter. Absalom recognized that although David was resolute and decisive in battle, he was indecisive and weak on the domestic front. Absalom sensed weakness not only in family matters but also in the administration of justice within the country (15:3–4). In response to David's pardon and reconciliation, Absalom initiated a campaign of suspicion and subversion, seeking to do to David what he had done to Amnon. "Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel" (15:6), hoping to be anointed king in Hebron, after which he would overthrow David's government in Jerusalem.

David's family feuding turned into civil war. Absalom entered Jerusalem, and in panic David ran for his life, afraid of his son. Jerusalem briefly came under the full control of Absalom. In an act as symbolic as the raising of a flag over the city, Absalom publicly cohabited with David's mistresses, who had remained in Jerusalem (16:22). Had Absalom stayed in bed with concubines, the revolt may have succeeded. But he abandoned the advice of his best counselor, Ahithophel, and unwittingly followed the advice of David's loyal undercover agent, Hushai. Absalom denied Ahithophel his request that he be permitted to make an immediate night attack upon David and kill him. Hushai succeeded with his trick of stalling for time until David could be alerted to Absalom's intentions.

The battle that followed was successful for David. As a matter of fact, it was too successful. David wanted only to save his life and throne; he did not want Absalom injured. But Absalom died a brutal death. Accidentally caught by his neck in a tree, Joab attacked him with darts, and Joab's ten armor-bearers attacked him with swords. Nathan's curse came true a again: "The sword shall never depart from your house."

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David survived the military attack, but he nearly died from grief: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:33).

Rivalry, hostility, and heartache continued to plague David’s family. David’s second-born son, whose name was either Daniel or Chileab (1 Chronicles 3:1; 2 Samuel 3:2), probably died a premature natural death. Had he lived, he would certainly have been one of the possible contenders for David’s throne. Assuming death or serious disability in the case of Daniel-Chileab, David’s three eldest sons were no longer available to succeed him.

The eldest available son was David’s fourth-born son, Adonijah. Assuming the right of the eldest son to be heir to the throne (note Solomon’s fear of his claim in 1 Kings 2:22), Adonijah and his intimate associates, Joab and Abiathar the priest, moved quickly during David’s final days of life to claim the throne. But while Adonijah was publicly active *claiming himself* king—with due military and priestly support—Nathan, Bathsheba, and Solomon maneuvered privately with the ailing monarch to secure the throne for Solomon. King David made his final major decision in *giving Solomon* his throne: “. . . he shall come and sit upon my throne; for he shall be king in my stead; and I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and over Judah” (1 Kings 1:35).

But Adonijah did not abandon his quest for the throne. Although he acknowledged David’s choice of Solomon as the heir, he made one final attempt to overturn David’s decision. The last woman in David’s life was the nurse, Abishag, who attended David in his dying days. When David died, Adonijah requested permission to marry Abishag. But Solomon recog-

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nized the less than subtle plot of Adonijah. Adonijah could claim that Abishag, as the last woman in David's life, was more than David's nurse. Adonijah could insist that she was in reality David's last wife and therefore the real queen of Israel. With "Queen Abishag" as his wife Adonijah would then become the king and could legitimately claim the throne from Solomon. It was a brilliant idea, but it did not work. Instead of gaining a wife, Adonijah lost his life, for Solomon ordered Adonijah executed (1 Kings 2:23–5). Fratricide flourished again in the household of David, and the sword of Solomon secured his throne. So did the words of the prophet Nathan haunt the house of David even after his death: "The sword shall never depart from your house."

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

2 Samuel 14:22—"Joab fell on his face to the ground, and did obeisance, and blessed the king."

Joab was David's nephew and cousin to all of David's sons. [page 32] He showed absolute loyalty to David until David showed his overwhelming grief for Absalom. Joab could not tolerate David's indifference to the risk which the troops had taken to crush Absalom's rebellion and save David's crown. He actually reprimanded the king (2 Samuel 19:7–8) and eventually gave partisan support to Adonijah. The final time that Joab "fell on his face to the ground" was when Benaiah executed him in the tent of the Lord as ordered by Solomon.

2 Samuel 14:24—"Let him dwell apart in his own house; he is not to come into my presence."

For two years Absalom lived with the prohibition to stay away from the king's palace. This was for Absalom an un-

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acceptable “reconciliation”; he preferred death (“. . . let him kill me,” he said in 2 Samuel 14:32) to this continued alienation. David’s decision to isolate Absalom was not productive punishment. It precluded any possibility of communication. Consequently, Absalom spent his idle years in plotting rebellion. Absalom correctly recognized that if his father was unwilling to welcome him into the royal presence, he was not likely to make him the heir to the throne. If Absalom wanted to be king, he would have to take matters into his own hands. Only subversion and rebellion would get him what he wanted and thought he rightfully deserved. David’s “silent treatment” toward Absalom only worsened an already bad situation.

1 Kings 1:5—“Now Adonijah . . . prepared for himself chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him.”

Absalom’s younger half brother, Adonijah, inherited his fair share of royal beauty and ambition. He learned quickly the prerogatives and privileges of being a royal prince. He helped himself to the royal treasury and established a sizable military unit to be his personal bodyguard. The “horsemen” referred to are not cavalymen but charioteers. Needing fifty footmen and an unspecified number of chariots, Adonijah felt either very threatened or very ambitious. Whatever Adonijah’s motivation, it is amazing to see the changes that had taken place in the period of one generation. The shepherd boy David guarded fifty or more sheep, but the same shepherd’s son required fifty or more bodyguards. David indulged his children seemingly with unlimited material advantages. They proved to be a poor substitute for meaningful individual attention and personal affection.

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1 Kings 1:6—“His father had never at any time displeased him.”

Although David indulged his children with all that the royal household could afford, he denied them what they needed most—parental time, attention, and advice. David must have had as many children as he could father, but he had more children than he could handle. With forty women in his life and as many children, David had more than he could handle on the home front, let alone being busy on the battlefield. The king who demanded discipline in his army was content with undisciplined children. There is no reason to think that the attention given to Adonijah was any different from that given to David’s other children. It could probably be said about all of them that their father never asked them, “Why have you done thus and so?” In seeking to avoid “displeasing” his children, David denied them both wise counsel in learning to make decisions and fatherly care.

Applying the Lesson to Life

It would be so very easy to insist that this biblical material has no significance to the Christian today since few of us come from royal homes or aspire for royal positions. But the material addresses itself to home life and to parent-child relationships, whether they be royal or common. Family problems share certain common patterns regardless of social class.

David had more children than he could handle. Certainly there was some correlation between the size of his family and the quantity of his family problems. David could afford to have the size family he had when it came to money, but he could not afford it when it came to time. We need not quibble about which is more important, time or money, but we must

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learn that time is important. The quality of family life is affected by the quantity of parental time spent with children.

The Memory Selection chosen for this lesson is Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go. . . .” “Training takes time. David did not have the time to ask his children, “Why have you done thus and so?” Responsible Christian decision in family planning will call for a commitment of time as well as money.

The Bible does not contain a transcript of the conversations within the royal family, but we do get a very clear impression that there was little genuine communication. Seduction, fratricide, and rebellion are not the results of open and honest communication, respect, and acceptance. Christian homes will have their fair share of hostility, rivalry, jealousy, and character assassination, unless there is more than a fair share of honest communication. David’s choice of “the silent treatment” as the way to handle Absalom does not provide a good model for discipline or punishment. Dialogue provides a much better model for instruction, correction, and affection. One can easily imagine the positive changes that might have come in David’s household if David had shared his affection for Absalom with Absalom while he was alive. To have been the recipient of his father’s love could have been as satisfying as being the heir to his father’s throne. The quest for power might have evaporated had there been a bequest of love.

David’s choice of Solomon as his heir was a highly significant symbolic affirmation. The old soldier in his final fading days actually affirmed the value of peace. David’s final words to Solomon were a symbolic declaration of peace! The name Solomon is derived from the Hebrew word *shalom*, “peace”: *Shalom! She-lo-mo! Solomon! Peace!*