

In All That You Do and Wherever You Turn

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King David is now old and, according to 1 Kings, chapter 1, he's also impotent. You'd think this would be his own personal business but in those days a king's staff knew such things – because a king's virility was considered critical to his fitness to rule. If you're interested in what his staff did to help him with this, you can read it yourself. In the meantime his oldest living son, Adonijah, got Joab and his father's bodyguards to help him assume the throne. Nathan and Bathsheba concocted a successful plan to replace him with his little brother, Bathsheba's son, Solomon. With David's blessing.

Adonijah is amazed when Solomon doesn't have him executed. Bringing us here to chapter 2 – David's deathbed scene. The entire text of 1st and 2nd Kings was composed for an audience who for the most part no longer believed in the God of David and ancient Israel. That God who had promised king and country would last forever. An audience whose ancestors gradually forgot some parts of that promise, the parts about fidelity and righteousness and trust . . . and then reaped the consequences common to all who do the same.

I've no racy, violent bloody stories to tell today, no more beating up on King David, wondering why God favored him so when he was such a royal jerk. But rather, it's time to make some sort of meaning from the tale, see what take-aways it might have for our lives, our life together, our life in God. One beauty of 1 Kings 2 (by beauty I mean literary beauty) is the movement between verses 4 and 5: calling Solomon to perfect trust in God and then moving to a list of people Solomon needs to execute before he gets too far into his reign. Perhaps no moment in the story is MORE indicative of King David.

That said, these first four verses are the words of a parent longing to save the son a world of grief and heartache by learning from his own mistakes. "Do as I say, Son, not as I do. Keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn." David knows it's true. He's lived every word of it. But alas, with the son: listen and learn? Or make the same mistakes to learn the same lessons himself? Depends on the son – or daughter.

Morally, Solomon was a huge improvement over David. Huge. A sort of level era in Israel's slow descent into near oblivion. Possibly even a tick up, since he's the king who built the Temple – our topic next week.

Surely there are dozens, but three take-aways – three things we might learn from the life of King David:

Take-away #1 – *Perfect faith can be told by imperfect people.* David is least of all a hypocrite in the first four verses of this speech to Solomon. That he failed to follow it himself doesn't make it a bit less true. He knew its truth better than most, felt its truth, endured its truth more acutely – maybe – than those who obey the truth their whole lives long.

Take-away #2 – *Regardless of intentions, actions have consequences.* Guilt, shame, and regret are feelings that ebb and flow with the amount of adrenaline flowing through one’s veins. Hormones, desire, fear – all of them are death to common sense and good judgment. So much so, we humans can be genuinely surprised to suffer entirely predictable consequences.

“But I truly didn’t mean to hurt anyone,” we say, in all honesty. Except that feelings neither cause nor prevent consequences, do they? Only actions do that. My thoughts and feelings are between me and God. Actions are between me and God AND OTHERS – sometimes others who are close to me, sometimes others that have nothing to do with me.

Here’s a less graphic version of a story I read this week in the Arkansas State University alumni newsletter: A young woman is starting her freshman year at ASU for the second time. Last year during welcome week she attended a freshman picnic next door to a fraternity house where some undergraduate men were playing baseball, except with a football and a golf club.

When the batter made contact with the ball, the golf club snapped and sailed through the air like a spear, striking the young woman at the picnic. She was airlifted to Memphis for surgery and then again to Atlanta for 8 months of rehabilitation. She’s back at ASU again, still recovering but ready to start college.

Regardless of intention, actions have consequences.

Take-away #3 – *All power, worldly and God-given, inevitably corrupts those who cling to it.* Power corrupts those who cling to power more closely than they cling to God, more closely than they cling to pleasing God, more closely than they cling to the well-being and integrity of others. David – King David – his sons, his officers, even as they trusted God’s goodness clung to power, to office and ambition, above all else. In the end, it killed nearly every one of them – which is NOT the most regrettable part. The most regrettable part: all the innocent swept into the terrible consequences of their addiction to power and the delusion of their own moral autonomy. Ripples and ripples of ruin – through families, communities, Israel. Their appetite for power sowed itself into the DNA of Israel’s life together, delivering them finally to Babylon. When it comes to power, David teaches us what *not* to do.

Jesus teaches the opposite – the One uncorrupted by this world teaching us, inviting us to speak truth TO power, to reap the consequences therein, consequences of courageous submission.

If David is not comparable to Jesus – then who in our story?

Nathan. Nathan is the one modeling courageous submission. This is definitely THE most complicated take-away, because David was the King. Kings have bloody hands, no way around it. David’s were bloodier than necessary. For greed, and the unholy use of power. None escape and remain king for long.

Except David, of course, who remained 40 years – seven in Hebron, 33 in Jerusalem, according to the text. Forty years, for better and for worse. God knows there was plenty of both.

Whatever you think of him, David did nothing gently, only boldly – always hugely. Reaping the rewards and punishments, sometimes simultaneously, of the faith that never left him. In the God who never left him – or them. Down the long line of his descendents – people who lost more than humans generally imagine being able to lose and still keep faith. Do you, friends, desire to keep faith?

Why?

Out of habit? Remember what Eeyore said when he lost his tail? “It wasn’t much of a tail, but I’d gotten kind of attached to it.”

Out of tradition? A way of remembering and respecting our parents, our history?

To raise good kids maybe?

Or because it’s a low risk investment – all things considered it seems like an easy bet, not much to lose?

OR (and this is the right answer, friends) – because your heart and soul tell you that for all the mysterious parts and all the embarrassing parts and all the parts that don’t even make sense – the God of this story is the same One who speaks to you, in whom you are most completely at home – in your skin and in the world? That in all that you do and wherever you turn you find the Creator at work: in the politics of this world, broken as they are; in nature; in your relationships; in your heart and soul; in what clicks along like clockwork; and in what is forever frustrating.

Even when the character is one like David and the story is as sketchy as this, nothing else – nobody else – makes sense apart from faith in this same God.

Whatever we think of him, at the end of the story – if we understand the story – we can give King David a break. Because the story isn’t about him at all. It is about you, and me; it’s about our life together and our lives in God, who saved us a long, long time ago and longs even now to make us his.