



## The Lost Son

Father's Day

Jim Farrar, who used to attend this church but now lives down south, raised three very fine sons. Two of those sons pastored this church at different times and now have international ministries that impact many. Another son has gone on to be with the Lord but he was a successful businessman. All three have strong families of their own. Jim never wrote a book and had his share of struggles in his career, but he's been a successful father. When his son, Steve, wrote his first book he dedicated it to his father and simply wrote, "To James R. Farrar, my dad, in appreciation for over forty years of spiritual leadership where it really counts. At home."

I've often noticed that some of the least successful men by the world's standards have raised children of whom anyone would be proud. At the same time, some of the most "successful" men have been terrible fathers. A prime example of that is King David. David was a king and David was a father. But David was a much better king than father. As a King, he gets gold stars; as a father, he flunks.

### I. David hears of Absalom's death.

Let me give you some background. After David became a successful king, he fell into the twin sins of adultery and murder. God confronted him through the prophet Nathan and told him that as a result of his sin "the sword will never depart from your house" (2 Sam.12:10). In 2 Samuel 15-16 all of this came to fruition as David's son Absalom stole the throne from right under his father's nose. David was forced to leave his home and his beloved Jerusalem, knowing that his own angry son would soon be entering the city and seeking his life. Absalom entered Jerusalem and proceeded to have sex with his father's concubines.

In 2 Samuel 17-18 a showdown takes place between David's troops and Absalom's troops. In this encounter, Absalom is killed by David's military general, Joab. He was killed despite the fact that David had given explicit orders to bring his son back alive.

With Absalom dead and his troops defeated someone had to report the news to David—not an easy job. David knows nothing about what had happened. I can see David pacing back and forth, waiting like fathers and

mothers do with a son in combat. You wait for some kind of news but you fear what that news might be. As David sits by the gate, two men actually come to tell him what has happened. They must have been torn. On the one hand, they want to say, "We won! The enemy is defeated! The throne is back in your hands! You can go back to Jerusalem now!" But on the other hand, they must have known how hard it would be to deliver the news about Absalom. But, notice what's uppermost in David's mind: not the outcome of the battle, but the condition of his son.

In v. 32 David asks one of the messengers, a Cushite by birth, what has happened to his son. Then the king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And the Cushite answered, "Let the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up against you for evil, be as that young man!" There are certain moments in each of our lives when time sort of freezes; words spoken to us in times like these are never forgotten. This was such a moment for David. These are cold, hard words. No name is given. Nothing said about this being David's son. He's seen as just another of the king's enemies: "Would that all the king's enemies be as that young man."

### II. David's grieves over Absalom's death.

A. David's cry: It's interesting, in the original Hebrew Bible, the chapter ends with verse 32. This gives the reader a chance to pause a moment and consider how David might respond. It strikes me that David might be torn between two roles here, as we sometimes are. David is both king and father. As king, he has the realities of his job to think about but, as father, he also has his family to think about. As far as his job is concerned, things are looking pretty good. The throne is back in his own hands. But, as a father, things couldn't be worse. Who was David? Was he more king than father or more father than King?

All we have to do is read v.33 to answer that question. "The king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And thus he said as he walked, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!'" Few biblical scenes are more heartrending than this. The king was "deeply moved." The word means to quake or shudder. It's like he's writhing with birth pangs. David

then shuffles to his private chamber where an aching, wailing, lonely cry of anguish echoes for all to hear. Five times he says, "O my son!" Three times he cries out his name, "Absalom", as if to bring him back from the dead.

I want to step back from this and ask a question: What's going on in David's mind right now? What kinds of thoughts and feelings are implicit in this anguished cry? If and when you and I are confronted with the same reality, a son or daughter who dies or even strays, what can we expect to feel? I believe implicit in David's cry are three things.

**B. David's remorse:** First of all, remorse. At least part of what David is feeling right now is a sense of remorse and regret for his own failings as a father. As godly a man as David was, he had made some substantial blunders. He was an inconsistent model. Though at times he displayed a passionate relationship with God and a great deal of personal integrity, he also had his season of sin. Not only did he commit adultery and murder but he allowed those sins to go unconfessed for an entire year. As parents, we all know how critical modeling is, we know much our kids pick up "in between the lines" of our lectures. David knew it too, and he felt remorse because he was an inconsistent model.

He was also a passive disciplinarian. He failed to confront and deal with the rebellion in his sons. His eldest son, Amnon, raped his half-sister Tamar. Scripture says when David heard of it he got angry but never did anything about it (13:21). He never confronted or disciplined his son. He was the classic passive father. His parenting style was, "Keep the boy out of trouble. It's not a big deal. I mean, he's just a young guy. He's just sowing a few wild oats. We all did that. He'll grow out of it." Like all passive men, David was a conflict avoider, and he knew it, and that's at least part of where his remorse came from.

Finally, David felt remorse because as a father he had failed to communicate his feelings. He had allowed long stretches of time to pass where he wanted so badly to reach out and communicate his love to his son, but didn't. After having Amnon killed, Absalom ran away to be with his grandfather. He was there for three years. During that time listen to what happened. **"So Absalom had fled and gone to Geshur, and was there three years. The heart of King David longed to go out to Absalom; for he was comforted concerning Amnon, since he was dead"** (2 Samuel 13:38–39). David longed to see his son but he never expressed that to him. He never did anything about it. It wasn't until Joab intervened that David allowed Absalom to come back to Jerusalem. And then to make matters worse, once Absalom was back in Jerusalem, David refused to see him or even acknowledge his presence. Look at 14:28. **"Now Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem, and did not see the king's face."** For two years, Absalom tried to get his father's

attention without success. David brought him back but shut him out.

I believe David regretted that now. He was an inconsistent model, a passive disciplinarian, and a poor communicator. And at this moment in time, when he heard of Absalom's tragic fate, all of his failure as a parent hit him. It IS a reminder to us as dads that we reap what we sow. Yes, there is always forgiveness from the Lord when we seek it. David knew the Lord's forgiving grace. But forgiveness notwithstanding, we reap what we sow. Galatians 6:7 says, **"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap."** Some of us have been duped into believing that if we'll simply confess our sins and claim God's forgiveness then everything will be okay. But that isn't what this verse says. This verse is written to people who live under grace. Grace means that God forgives you, and in forgiving you, he gives you the strength to endure the consequences. It doesn't mean the consequences are automatically removed. If I sin and in the process of sinning break my arm, when I find forgiveness from sin, I still have to deal with a broken bone. A broken arm is a broken arm, whether I've been forgiven or not. And when a parent willfully and irresponsibly acts against God's Word, not only does the parent suffer, but the kids suffer as well.

**C. David's disappointment:** The second thing that's wrapped up in this cry of grief is disappointment. What I mean here specifically is disappointment over the fact that all of the hopes and dreams he once had for Absalom were now dead. Absalom was a young man full of potential. Although he was the fourth son, he was a much more logical choice to be the next king than those born before him. In 14:25-27 we read about the kind of guy Absalom was. **"Now in all Israel was no one as handsome as Absalom, so highly praised; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no defect in him. When he cut the hair of his head (and it was at the end of every year that he cut it, for it was heavy on him so he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head at 200 shekels by the king's weight. To Absalom there were born three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar; she was a woman of beautiful appearance."**

He was an impressive guy! His hair alone weighed five and a half pounds when he cut it! Long hair was a symbol of strength and virility in those days. He also had an impressive family—three sons and a beautiful daughter. Absalom had everything going for him. He was David's pride and joy. The problem was we get the impression that Absalom knew it! Can you imagine being so caught up with yourself that you have a weighing in ceremony every time you cut your hair? What an ego! His story is a classic one of squandered potential. I have a feeling that David, like

many dads, got far too caught up in his son's outward success. So when David heard the news of his death, his dream for Absalom died, and the disappointment he felt had to be overwhelming. Every parent has dreams for their kids. Part of the fun of watching kids grow older is seeing some of those dreams fulfilled. It's disappointing to watch those dreams die.

**D. David's perplexity:** Wrapped up in this cry of grief was remorse and disappointment. But, there is one more thing going on here; I would call it perplexity. Perhaps more than anything else this was a cry to God of perplexed faith. David is perplexed over the seeming unfairness of it all. Notice he says, "O Absalom! Would I had died instead of you." He's thinking, "It should have been me, Lord. Why have you been so merciful to me and yet so hard on Absalom?" David knew that somehow God's hand was in this (17:14). And this is what he's struggling with. Why does the Lord allow our kids to make choices that end in pain? Why does the Lord allow people to come into their lives who influence them the wrong way? Why does he allow events that result in tragedy? Why them and not us? When we see our kids crash and burn, it's normal to be perplexed.

Wrapped up in David's cry of grief over a lost son or daughter are feelings of remorse, disappointment, and perplexity. The amazing thing is that David was able to recover. He was a father first, but he was also able to resume his duties as king. But, he's a different man: humbled, wounded. So what can we learn, especially as fathers, from this story?

### III. What we can learn from David's loss.

*A. First, fathers, lead the way in disciplining your kids.* David got angry with Amnon after he raped his half sister, but he did nothing about it. Proverbs says a lot about the discipline of our children. It clearly lays this responsibility upon the father's shoulders. Discipline simply means creating consequences for our children when they willfully disobey. Proverbs refers to "the rod of discipline." This includes spanking or as a child gets older other forms of punishment like taking away a privilege or assigning an unpleasant task. It also means allowing a child to suffer the natural consequences of his or her actions

I realize what I'm saying isn't very popular these days. I know we have a problem in our society with out of control, abusive parents. Let me be clear that the discipline I'm talking about should only be done by a loving parent who is completely in control of his faculties. When done properly, it's painful for a child, but it doesn't injure a child. If there are parents who can't control their own anger and

are at all prone to be abusive, then they should find some other form of discipline.

But Proverbs 13:24 says, "**He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently.**" The motive behind discipline is love. It actually says that the one who doesn't discipline his child hates him. It strikes me that the Bible has a radically different view of discipline than we often do. Many would say that the reason they don't discipline their children is because they love them too much to hurt them, but this says the father who won't discipline his child hurts them more by creating a situation where the child is bound to fail in life.

Part of the reason for this is the reality of sin in every child's heart. Proverbs 22:15 says, "**Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.**" This is a very realistic view of children. It recognizes the presence of foolishness, sin, and self-will in every child's heart. We like to think that every child is born with a kind of clean slate or even a propensity towards good, but that's not true. Every child is of infinite worth to God, but they're born with a bent towards self will. It's a father's job to train a child through discipline that he can't always have his own way. This will pay off later on as that child grows up and learns to submit his will to God.

*B. Second, as fathers, when you forgive, forgive completely.* I've thought a lot about that period of time when David longed to reach out to his son but didn't do it. Three years! Then when Absalom finally was allowed to come back to Jerusalem, David still won't see him for two more years. It's like he forgives, but not completely. He lets his son back into his life, but builds an emotional wall. Why was that? Why didn't he just let go of it? His son was dying for love! I think the answer is pride. David was imprisoned by his own pride. Pride kept him from reaching out to his son. Pride kept him from letting the past go and embracing him again. This is a powerful reminder to us fathers to get over our pride and reach out to our sons and daughters who might have done some very hurtful things to us or our wives or our reputation. I'm not saying you ignore these things; I'm not saying you sweep it all under the rug. I'm saying you deal with it and when it's over you refuse to allow your hurt feelings and your wounded pride control that relationship. Keep short accounts. Communicate your heart to them. When forgiveness is sought, give it freely and fully. Don't allow past wrongs suffered to lie long as open, untreated wounds. They don't just go away in time. Talk about it and let it go.

*C. Third, understand that there are forces at work in your children's lives that you can't control.* Yes, David

made a lot of mistakes, but what happened to Absalom wasn't all David's fault. There were decisions made by Absalom that David couldn't control. That's true with our kids as well. Wouldn't it be nice if we could follow a nice script and be guaranteed to have nice, successful, church going, God loving kids. But, we have no such thing. Instead we have the risky business of fathering in a sinful world where awful things take place and where God doesn't always cooperate with our agenda. When we choose to be a father, we make a decision for both joy and sorrow. And I'd like to be able to say that the joy always outweighs the sorrow, but that's not always true. Like David, when we experience sorrow as a father that eclipses every other area of our lives that may be going well. Let me make a plug here for supporting one another as parents. I'm afraid that often times Christians are the worst at this. We've read all our James Dobson books and we think we know all the answers. We walk around like a bunch of parental police dogs blowing our whistle every time someone breaks the law. It's okay to confront, but how about getting down in the trenches with that person and loving them enough to listen to them, pray with them, and take their kids out for an ice cream cone? When it comes to parenting, very few of us need to be reminded how poor we are at it. We need support and encouragement.

*D. Finally, God uses all of this to shape and mold us into the men he wants us to be.* I wish it was easier. I wish we didn't have to go through the pain. But we need to remember that in all of this our Father in heaven is training and disciplining us, not for evil but for good. Under his hand, we end up being much softer and more humble and more gracious men than before. John White, who wrote a fine book called *Parents in Pain*, said this after years of parenting a son who went astray: "If we had our lives to live over again we would not have it different. For in months and years of darkness we learned lessons we could never have learned in the light. Our souls have been stretched so that they now have a capacity for both joy and suffering that they never had before. The pain that could have shriveled and embittered us has made us stronger, more alive."

## CONCLUSION

We started by talking about successful men who are bad fathers, and unsuccessful men who are good fathers. I want you to know that it's possible to be both. General Douglas MacArthur was among the greatest military heroes of all time. He led the Allied forces to victory in WW II and then commanded the United Nations forces in Korea. But Douglas MacArthur believed his greatest accomplishment was in being a father. In 1942 he was given an award for being a fine father. This is what he had to say on that day. "Nothing has touched me more deeply than this honor given to me by the National Father's Day committee. By profession I'm a soldier and take great pride in that fact. But I am prouder, infinitely prouder, to be a father. The soldier destroys in order to build. The father only builds, never destroys. The one has the potentialities of death, the other embodies creation and life. And while the hordes of death are mighty, the battalions of life are mightier still. It is my hope that my son, when I am gone, will remember me not from the battle but from the home."

May that be our hope and prayer as well!

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