

# **LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for November 23: When family bonds shatter**

November 11, 2008

In a few days, we will celebrate Thanksgiving, and then just a few weeks after that, Christmas will roll around. The holidays generally are envisioned as a time when families come together for fellowship in an environment of love and happiness.

But for many people, “family” and “happiness” are mutually exclusive concepts. For those folks, family life is marred by anger, resentment, harsh words or even physical violence. They look at how wholesome family life is supposed to be and compare that ideal with the reality of how things are in their own experience, and see a vast gulf fixed between the two.

Unhealthy families certainly aren’t a new phenomenon; they have existed alongside their healthy counterparts ever since families have existed. Our study passages in 2 Samuel 13-18 shine a light into some of the dark corners of the family life of King David, and what we see there is that David’s family put the “dys” in “dysfunctional.”

Last week, we examined what is, without a doubt, the ugliest chapter in the story of David’s life—his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and his murder of Bathsheba’s husband. Chapter 12 tells us David repented of his sin and God graciously forgave him, but that chapter also contains a warning from God that the consequences of the king’s sin would weave their awful way through his kingdom and his own family. Some of that spiritual fallout can be seen in the very next chapter, chapter 13.

One of David’s sons from his wife Ahinoam was a man named Amnon (2

Samuel 3:2). Amnon fell in lust with his half-sister Tamar, who along with her brother, Absalom, were the children of David's wife Maacah (3:3). Acting on his lust, Amnon raped Tamar, and then immediately felt contempt for her and cast her aside (13:1-19).

When King David learned of what Amnon had done, he was furious (13:21). There appears, however, to have been no confrontation or punishment of Amnon, and no justice for Tamar.

Some commentators have suggested that under a strict reading of the Torah, there really wasn't much David could have done to Amnon. The penalty of 50 shekels of silver required by Deuteronomy 22:28-29 would have been a paltry amount for a king's son to have to pay, and the closeness of their family relationship nullified the Levitical requirement that Amnon marry Tamar.

But it also is possible that David just swept the matter under the rug and intentionally said or did nothing. David's tendency to deal with family problems by not dealing with them (which we will see in chapter 14) suggests this was the case. But as we will see, a lot of heartache might have been spared later down the road if only the king had acted wisely and decisively early in the process.

Perhaps this would be a good time to point out that there is a difference between being a peacemaker and being a peacekeeper. A peacemaker enters a troubled situation and helps bring healing and wholeness into it. A peacekeeper, however, is one whose philosophy of life is, "Do nothing; leave things alone, and hopefully they will get better."

Jesus calls us blessed if we act like the first of those two kinds of people (Matthew 5:9); but he didn't indicate there is anything particularly virtuous about being the second.

The preceding paragraph does not come, however, without a word of

caution. It isn't necessary (or wise) for us to insert ourselves into every troubled situation that comes our way. The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is "a time to be silent, and a time to speak" (3:7). Wisdom and the leadership of God teach us which is which.

Like David, Tamar's brother Absalom also said or did nothing to Amnon (2 Samuel 13:22), but his silence masked a vengeful spirit. Absalom quietly bided his time until two full years had gone by, and then hatched a successful plot to have Amnon murdered (13:23-29).

After Amnon's murder, Absalom fled the country, and once again David did nothing either to hold his son accountable for his actions or to reach out to him in paternal love. Inwardly, David yearned for his son and longed to have him back in Jerusalem; but he was unwilling to take the first step toward reconciliation, and so three years by with Absalom in his self-imposed exile (v. 38).

But at last Joab, David's nephew and commanding general of his army, acted to bring about reconciliation between father and son (14:1-17). In a tactic similar to (and perhaps inspired by) the one used by Nathan in 12:1-4, Joab enlisted the aid of a woman from the town of Tekoa to approach the king with a fictitious story. That story (which has remarkable parallels to the story of Cain and Abel—see Genesis 4:8-15) mirrored the situation of David and Absalom, and at its conclusion the Tekoite woman invited the king to see himself in the tale and act accordingly (vv. 13-14).

Moved by the woman's story, David relented and directed Joab to go and bring Absalom back to Jerusalem. But when Joab returned with the king's son, David instructed his general to take Absalom to his own house and not to the palace, stating that Absalom would not be permitted into David's presence (vv. 21-24). So in a sense, even though back in his hometown, Absalom still was in exile and separated from his father.

It is something of a puzzle that David acted in this way toward his son, especially in light of how the king's heart had longed for Absalom during the three years the young man had been away. Robert Bergen suggests in the *New American Commentary* that by isolating Absalom and barring him from the palace, David was sending his son a message that even though he was the heir apparent to Israel's throne, his actions had disqualified him from being king.

Perhaps an equally good suggestion is that David simply was unwilling to offer his son anything more than incomplete reconciliation. Even though in a wonderful position to help make true peace in his family, David instead gave Absalom the silent treatment to make sure his son knew he still was angry with him.

Partial forgiveness and incomplete reconciliation can be devastating to families. Old wounds might fester for years, always on the verge of being re-opened so that the poison spills out again. A mark of spiritual maturity is the willingness to work toward true restoration wherever there is relational brokenness (Galatians 6:1).

David did finally extend full forgiveness to Absalom (vv. 28-33), but the five years of physical and emotional separation had taken their toll on the father-son relationship. We already have seen that Absalom was a scheming and malicious individual, and it was just a matter of time until the resentment simmering in the young man's heart would be acted upon.

The Bible says Absalom was a physically attractive man (14:25); in chapter 15, we also learn he possessed a manipulatively charming personality (15:1-6). He used those qualities to his advantage to gather a following and stage a coup against his father, David (15:7-12). Chapters 15-18 describe in lurid detail Absalom's treachery, as well as the heartbreak his actions brought into David's life and family.

We cannot know all of Absalom's motivations in this affair, but there can be little doubt he felt justified in his actions because of how his father had treated him earlier. He might have thought, "It's payback time!"

But there is no good justification for this sort of manipulation or intentional hurtfulness in our relationships, and especially not in our own family relationships. Family reconciliation and healing take place when we give up our "right" to get even with those who have hurt us.