

Blessed Expendability

2 Samuel 18-20

One of the ways the Roman Catholic Church has set tradition over Scripture is in its teachings about the Virgin Mary. While the Catholic Church rightly confesses that Jesus was conceived and born of a virgin, it has wrongly drawn a series of other conclusions that are claimed to be legitimate developments of that biblical teaching. The Catholic Church teaches that Mary is a new Eve who, by her choice to become the vessel of the Incarnation, reversed Eve's disastrous choice and brought life, instead of death, to humanity. In order to be prepared for that momentous act, she had to be supernaturally preserved from sin, and so the Catholic Church teaches that from the moment of her own conception in her mother's womb, Mary was preserved from the stain of original sin. Consequently, she lived her entire life without sin, and after her death she was assumed bodily into Heaven, where she reigns as Queen of Heaven, as Mother of the Church, and as intercessor with her Son on behalf of the faithful.

The Catholic Church has taken a biblical truth—the virgin conception and birth of Jesus from Mary—and turned it into something the Bible doesn't teach, namely, a doctrine about Mary's exceptional qualifications to be the mother of Christ. In their view, Mary rises above the rest of humanity. Ironically, I would argue that the Bible's emphasis on Mary's virginity makes just the opposite point. Instead of elevating Mary (or Joseph, for that matter) the biblical teaching of the virgin birth shows us that God did it all. The Messiah cannot come into the world by an act of human will or ability. The Kingdom of God cannot be built by the hands of men. When you think of the virgin birth, let it remind you of the biblical truth that salvation is of the Lord.

It seems there is a similar message in this story from 2 Samuel 18-20, a story about the surprising way God preserves his kingdom by his power and grace alone. In order to understand where we are, let's review: David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, impregnated her, and then had her husband Uriah murdered to cover his tracks. The Lord confronted David through the prophet Nathan, and David repented and was forgiven. But there would be serious consequences for his sin. Nathan said in 12:10-12, "Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the LORD, Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun." In time, David's son Absalom became David's enemy and led an insurrection against him. David fled from Jerusalem to the city of Mahanaim east of the Jordan River. And David's chief counselor, Ahithophel, defected to Absalom's side. But last time we saw how the Lord thwarted Ahithophel's counsel with Absalom and set Absalom up for defeat. Now we have come to the point of battle, where the future of David's kingdom hangs in the balance. What these three chapters show us, in concluding this story of insurrection in David's kingdom, is that God, who made glorious promises about David's kingdom in 2 Samuel 7, will be faithful to his promises. He will preserve David's kingdom through this turmoil. And he will do it *in spite of David*. David will not be the one to save his kingdom. The Lord must do it, for salvation is of the Lord.

As we enter into the story of this passage, let it be to us a warning against every illusion of our own importance that we may entertain. As good Protestants, we confess the truth that it is by

grace we are saved through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. And yet, even as we rule out boasting in salvation, don't we have a tendency to crave it in reference to our own role of service in the kingdom of God? Don't we often feel the temptation to want to justify ourselves by how gifted we are, how much we have accomplished for God, how necessary our work is to advance God's purposes in this world? Deep down, don't we just want to be needed? There is a blessing in accepting your own expendability. God does not need you. You cannot build his kingdom. But if you are willing to get over yourself and come with empty hands, you can enter it and enjoy the fullness of life with God forever. David's story points us to that wonderful, freeing biblical truth, a truth that highlights God's power, God's sufficiency, and God's grace.

There are two main divisions of this story. My plan is to walk through them both, show you what the biblical author is telling us, and then make an application to our lives.

In the first section of the story, we see that

1. The Lord delivers David from Absalom despite David's weakness (18:1-19:8a).

David's spy Hushai had bought David time by convincing Absalom to gather a large force and lead it out himself. So David had the opportunity to organize his forces after his arrival at Mahanaim, his new headquarters in exile. He divided his army into three divisions under three commanders. At first David intended to go into battle himself, but his commanders convinced him that it was tactically better for him to stay behind in the city, for the whole focus of Absalom's army would be to kill David. David agreed to stay behind, but he gave a command in verse 5 that sets up a major conflict in this chapter: "And the king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, 'Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.' And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders about Absalom." Although we can understand David's natural fatherly affection for his son, we must recognize that David shows a significant moral weakness driven by his emotions, not by truth, in giving this command. Yes, Absalom is his son. But Absalom is also a rebel against the Lord's anointed one. He is an insurrectionist against the kingdom God established. He is a man who openly defied God's Law by lying with his father's ten concubines, and he did it proudly and out in the open. Absalom has set his face against the Lord, and as David represents the Lord's rule over Israel, David's first priority should be to end this rebellion. The only effective way to do that is to take down its leader. But David is not thinking in those terms. His natural affection as a parent clouds his judgment.

Tragically, it is not uncommon for parental affection to become a wedge that Satan uses to drive Christian parents toward compromise of their convictions. How many Christian parents have found their views on the sanctity of unborn life changing when it was their teenage daughter who got pregnant outside of wedlock? How many Christian parents have found their views on homosexuality evolving when one of their own children "came out" as gay? How many Christian parents have allowed their family's church involvement to take a backseat to travel ball, raising their kids with a mindset that sports always come first, and God and his people come second? Parents, you must understand that compromising obedience to the Lord for the sake of your children is neither loving your children, nor is it honoring the Lord.

The account of the battle itself is very short and sweet in verses 6-8, where we read that David's forces, though smaller in number, completely routed Absalom's army. David's men, who were

better trained, used the rough terrain of the forest to their advantage and nullified Absalom's numerical advantage. The Lord gave David's army a complete victory. But that is reported to us in only three verses. Much greater focus is given to what happened to Absalom in the course of the battle in verses 9-18. While he was riding through the forest, he rode under low-hanging branches of an oak tree. It may have been a forked branch, and his long hair, which had been one of his impressive features (14:25-27) got caught in the branch while his mule kept going. Then as Absalom felt his hair pulling, and not wanting his scalp to rip right off his head, he grabbed on to the branch while his mule kept going, leaving him hanging there with his hair tangled in the branch. So there he was, suspended between heaven and earth. And at this point a verse from the Law of Moses should come to your mind. Deuteronomy 21:23 pronounces a curse on all who are hanged on a tree. The events unfolding in the forest show us that Absalom is a man cursed by God, sentenced to death. It just so happened that an unnamed soldier in David's army spotted Absalom in his vulnerable position and went and reported the news to Joab. Joab was astonished that the soldier didn't kill Absalom when he had the chance. But the man knew of King David's command to deal gently with Absalom, and he would not put his own life at risk in disobedience to the king. But Joab had no scruples about it. After arguing back and forth with his soldier, Joab found Absalom, thrust three javelins into his heart, and then let his personal bodyguards finish the job.

After Absalom's death, Joab blew the trumpet to call his men back from the battle. With its leader gone, this insurrection was effectively over. Notice the interesting note about the burial of Absalom in verses 17-18: "And they took Absalom and threw him into a great pit in the forest and raised over him a very great heap of stones. And all Israel fled every one to his own home. Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself the pillar that is in the King's Valley, for he said, 'I have no son to keep my name in remembrance.' He called the pillar after his own name, and it is called Absalom's monument to this day." We have an interesting juxtaposition of two monuments here. One is the monument Absalom built for himself, much like King Saul had done (1 Sam. 15:12). Absalom said he did it as a memorial to his name because he had no son to keep his name in remembrance. Yet 14:27 tells us Absalom had three sons. I think the best way to fit these two verses together is to assume that all three of Absalom's sons had died because the Lord cut off the offspring of this wicked man. So he built a monument to his own name. But his death sounds eerily similar to this account from Joshua 8:29 about the Canannite king of the city of Ai: "And he [Joshua] hanged the king on a tree until evening. And at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the gate of the city and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day." Like the pagan king of Ai, Absalom is hanged on a tree and buried under a heap of stones as an enemy of God.

We got three verses summarizing the battle. We got ten verses telling the story of Absalom's death. Now we get fifteen bizarre verses about these two guys running to tell David the news. Why on earth does the author go on and on and on about the runners? It's because he is building narrative tension. Now that Absalom is dead, contrary to David's desire, we are left wondering, "How will David respond?" So slowly and patiently, the author tells us about the youthful zeal of Ahimaaz who wanted to report the news of victory to the king. But Joab didn't want Ahimaaz to go because the news would also have to include a report about Absalom's death. So he sent an unnamed Cushite instead. But after the Cushite left, Ahimaaz kept begging to go, so Joab

relented and let him go, probably assuming he could never beat the Cushite in getting there. But lo and behold, Ahimaaz took a different route and arrived at Mahanaim first, where he reported the news of victory to David. But David has only one thought on his mind: how is Absalom? Ahimaaz doesn't have the heart to tell him, so he chickens out. Meanwhile, here comes the Cushite, who tells the same news, and when David asks about Absalom, the Cushite tells him in the most tactful way possible that Absalom is dead.

So here is the moment of truth: how will David respond? He loses it. His grief is so deep that when David's victorious army returns to the city, they act like an army defeated and humiliated. When Joab came back to the city, he boldly confronted David over this display of emotion and warned him that if he didn't change course quickly, he was going to lose the support of those who had just risked their lives for him. So David went out and took his seat at the gate and started acting like a king again.

Again, we can sympathize with David's sense of loss. No father wants to hear the news of his son's death. We can also sympathize with the fog of guilt that likely still hung over David's head. David knew that all the turmoil in his house and in his kingdom was the fruit of his own sin with Bathsheba. And so he probably felt responsible for his son's death. And in the fog of pain over his loss and guilt over his own role in it, David at first refused to act like a victorious king and instead succumbed to self-punishment. He was still being led by emotions rather than by truth. Because the truth of the matter is this: Absalom was a man cursed by God. The death of Absalom was the vindication of the Lord over his enemy, and when forced to show loyalty either to the Lord's kingdom or to his son, David should have chosen the former. And yes, David's sin had led to all these events. But David should have remembered the words of the prophet Nathan to him in 12:13: "The LORD has also put away your sin." David was forgiven, and he had no right to impose guilt on himself where the Lord imposed none. We must never assume our feelings of guilt about our own sin are more righteous than God's pardoning word.

David has shown a serious emotional weakness, first in giving the command to spare Absalom and then in his reaction to Absalom's death. Both times he put his own kingdom in jeopardy. And yet, the Lord graciously delivered David by putting Absalom to death and then by causing David to shape up and act like a king. And notice the surprising way he did so: through the bold and often ruthless actions of David's servant Joab. Joab disobeyed his king, but in doing so, he put Absalom to death. Joab boldly confronted his king, but in doing so, he made him act like a king again. And the story doesn't end there.

In the second half of these chapters, we see that

2. The Lord restores David's kingdom despite David's inability (19:8b-20:26).

It may not be evident exactly what is going on in the rest of chapter 19 if you don't understand the main problem David now faces, which is putting his fragile kingdom back together. A large number of his subjects had thrown in their lot with Absalom and chased David out of Jerusalem. The only way David will be able to return to power is with the support of the people. Verses 8-10 indicate that at first the northern tribes of Israel started making some noise about bringing David back. But the leadership of the tribe of Judah, David's own tribe, had not yet gotten on board. That makes sense because the greatest source of Absalom's support had been from the tribe of Judah, so many of the leaders of Judah probably had real questions about what David might do to

them in retaliation if he came back. So David started making some political moves, and the rest of chapter 19 tells of step after step he took to try to secure his power again. Verses 9-15 tells us that David did two things in particular: he sent word to the elders of Judah to make peace with them, and he installed Amasa in place of Joab as the new commander of his army. Amasa had been the commander of Absalom's army. Replacing Joab with Amasa was David's way of punishing Joab for killing his son against his own wishes, but more importantly, it was a political move to signal to the elders of Judah that he did not intend to take vengeance on them. He was willing to work with those who had sided against him.

The initial result of David's political moves is encouraging. Verse 15 reads, "So the king came back to the Jordan, and Judah came to Gilgal to meet the king and to bring the king over the Jordan." You may recall that when David left Jerusalem, he had a series of encounters with different individuals that are reported in chapters 15-16. Here as he comes back to Jerusalem, we read about three encounters with three individuals. One of them is Shimei, the Benjaminite who had cursed David and thrown rocks at him on his way out. As you can imagine, Shimei is now singing a different tune, begging for mercy from David. Although David's servant Abishai wants Shimei put to death for cursing the Lord's anointed one, David instead swears to Shimei an oath of royal pardon. Why would David do that? Look at verse 17: "And with him [Shimei] were a thousand men from Benjamin." These men didn't come with Shimei to threaten David, but their presence showed him that Shimei was a man with a lot of clout. So David, knowing his kingdom was in a fragile state, decided it was more important to foster good relationships with influential people at the present moment than to dispense strict justice.

The second encounter David has is with Mephibosheth, the lame son of Jonathan who, according to his servant Ziba, had taken sides against David when David was fleeing from Jerusalem. In response to that, David had declared that Ziba was entitled to Mephibosheth's inheritance. But now Mephibosheth himself appears before David, and his beard has not been trimmed, his feet have not been groomed, and his clothes have not been washed in a long time. Mephibosheth has carried himself as one in mourning ever since David left Jerusalem, and that is what makes his story against Ziba credible. As it turns out, Ziba had deceived David about Mephibosheth in order to take advantage of an opportunity to enrich himself. Upon hearing this, David gives a new decision in verse 29: "And the king said to him, 'Why speak any more of your affairs? I have decided: you and Ziba shall divide the land.'" Strictly speaking, that is not justice. Ziba did not deserve any of the land. And yet, Ziba had provided food for David's men at a time when they needed supplies, so David basically "split the baby" to try to navigate this situation to achieve the best political outcome.

The third encounter David has is with Barzillai, the old man who had brought an abundance of provisions to David and his men when they first came to Mahanaim. Although David offered him a place in David's court in Jerusalem, Barzillai refused, saying he was too old to enjoy the high life anymore. He just wanted to live out his final days in his own city. Instead, he sent son Chimham with David to Jerusalem.

So David has done his best to restore his kingdom. He has tried to secure broad support and make everyone happy. But as it turns out, the kingdom is too fragile to hold. Verses 41-43 tell of a dispute that broke out between the northern tribes and the tribe of Judah. Even though Judah

had been last on board to bring David back, once they got on board, the northern tribes started suspecting them of getting special favoritism from David. And with both sides suspicious of the other, the opportunity was ripe for someone to exploit the division. So now we come to 20:1: “Now there happened to be there a worthless man, whose name was Sheba, the son of Bichri, a Benjaminite. And he blew the trumpet and said, ‘We have no portion in David, and we have no inheritance in the son of Jesse; every man to his tents, O Israel!’ So all the men of Israel withdrew from David and followed Sheba the son of Bichri. But the men of Judah followed their king steadfastly from the Jordan to Jerusalem.” And now we have insurrection 2.0, only this time it falls along the lines of the northern tribes of Israel vs. the southern tribe of Judah. David’s response to Sheba’s rebellion is in verse 4: “Then the king said to Amasa, ‘Call the men of Judah together to me within three days, and be here yourself.’” But notice what happens in verse 5: “So Amasa went to summon Judah, but he delayed beyond the set time that had been appointed him.” It looks like the choice of Amasa to lead his army may have been a good political choice, but not necessarily the best choice in terms of military effectiveness. Amasa doesn’t seem to be up to the task. So David sends out his special forces under the command of Abishai, Joab’s brother, to pursue the rebel Sheba. And Joab goes out with them.

When Abishai’s men came to Gibeon, they met Amasa there. And in a scene that sounds a lot like a story from the book of Judges, this is what happened, starting in verse 8: “When they were at the great stone that is in Gibeon, Amasa came to meet them. Now Joab was wearing a soldier’s garment, and over it was a belt with a sword in its sheath fastened on his thigh, and as he went forward it fell out. And Joab said to Amasa, ‘Is it well with you, my brother?’ And Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him. But Amasa did not observe the sword that was in Joab’s hand. So Joab struck him with it in the stomach and spilled his entrails on the ground without striking a second blow, and he died.” Once Joab has gotten Amasa out of the way, his men literally get him out of the way, tossing his body aside and covering it so that it will no longer disrupt troop movement. Joab assumes command of David’s forces and heads north to the city of Abel of Beth-maacah, where Sheba has taken refuge.

Joab begins his assault on the city by building siege ramps and battering the wall, but a wise woman asked to speak to him, and in the course of their conversation Joab told her that he had no intention of destroying the city but would withdraw if the people would only deliver up Sheba to him. So the woman promised that his head would be thrown over the wall, and when she reported it to the residents of the city, they killed Sheba and threw his head over the wall to Joab, and he withdrew his forces. Insurrection 2.0 has been ended, and David’s kingdom has been restored.

In the course of telling this story, I skipped over one verse. Notice what happened when David first returned to Jerusalem in 20:3: “And David came to his house at Jerusalem. And the king took the ten concubines whom he had left to care for the house and put them in a house under guard and provided for them, but did not go in to them. So they were shut up until the day of their death, living as if in widowhood.” Let that be the image of David’s weakness that defines the latter part of his reign. He was a man who sinned, first by building up a harem for himself in disobedience to Deuteronomy 17:17, and then by his adultery and murder, he saw at least a portion of his harem defiled by his own son Absalom. So he did not lie with these ten concubines again, knowing that it was against the law of God for a father and son to lie with the same

woman. And these ten concubines, relegated to effective widowhood for life, are a lasting testimony to the wreckage of David's sin and his weakness in his latter years.

Now, contrast the weakness of David with the strength of Joab. David could not put his fragile kingdom back together. His choice of Amasa to lead his army was a tactical mistake. But Joab was really the one calling the shots for David's army. Joab is a ruthless man, a cold-blooded murderer who has always been fiercely loyal to David's kingdom but paradoxically insubordinate to David himself. Joab is not a righteous man. He does not seek the Lord's interests but only his own, and he is willing to sin in the most vicious ways to achieve his goals. And yet, it is Joab who comes home with the head of the rebel Sheba. It is wicked Joab whom the Lord used, not only to deliver David from Absalom, but also to restore David's kingdom in the aftermath of Absalom's rebellion. The fact that the Lord used Joab to accomplish what David, in his own weakness, could not accomplish is a testimony to the surprising ways that God often works to advance the purposes of his kingdom. Even the intentions and actions of a wicked man can be enlisted in service to the high and holy purposes of God.

With the whole story now in view, here is a word of application for us: **Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** Those words may sound familiar. They are the words of Jesus from Matthew 5:3, the first of the Beatitudes. What does Matthew 5:3 have to do with 2 Samuel 18-20? Here is the connection: we have seen here the story of a king whose kingdom was delivered and restored, but not through any ability of his own. David failed, but the Lord brought deliverance anyway in fulfillment of his promise. The kingdom God had established stood firm against its enemies, and David could not claim it as any achievement of his own.

Let us learn to see ourselves in the place of David. We are weak and incapable, but God's kingdom purposes advance nevertheless. We are, you might say, expendable to the fulfillment of God's purposes. That means God does not need us. Just as he can raise up stones to become children of Abraham, so can he raise up Joabs to defeat his enemies. God's purposes are not riding on us, and part of what it means to be poor in spirit is to recognize just how expendable we are. There is a certain frame of mind that will bristle at such a statement. Deep down, you want to know that your life counts, that it has meaning, that you can truly make a difference. And all that is good. But that natural desire can easily turn into an idol when it becomes a desire to make a name for yourself, to build your own kingdom instead of entering God's kingdom, to find a position where you can be recognized, to leave your mark on the world. It's very subtle, but when your desire for meaning in life becomes a desire for your own importance in God's kingdom, you have slipped into trying to justify yourself by your own works.

We must not allow the significance of our lives to be tied to what we think we can achieve for God. Our value is found in being loved by God before the foundation of the world, chosen by him, called to life by his grace, and destined for conformity to the image of his Son. Our justification is not found in what we might achieve in service to the kingdom. It is in the righteousness of Christ counted to us by faith alone. Do you want a life that counts? Then rest in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation. Love God and your neighbors. Let good works flow out of that love, and then immediately forget them when you have done them. Live out your days like that, and then be content to die and be forgotten within a few generations. I don't know the

names of my great-great grandparents. Your great-great grandchildren probably won't know your name. Your life is a mist that appears for a short time and then vanishes. Don't try to make it more than what it is. Don't bristle at the truth that you are expendable in the purposes of God. Embrace it.

Because once you grasp your expendability, you can rejoice in the absolute freedom of God's grace that has brought you into his kingdom. Recognizing your expendability and the wonder of God's grace is what we might call poverty of spirit. And you are blessed if you have it, for the kingdom of heaven is yours. There is only one character who sought to make a name for himself in this story by building a monument to his own glory, and that's Absalom. Instead of receiving the glory he sought, Absalom was hanged on a tree under the curse of God and buried under a pile of stones in disgrace. If, deep down, what you most desire is a name for yourself, then may the Word of God break you this morning. Put that desire to death. Craving to establish your own significance on your own terms will only make you incapable of receiving the glory that God has for you. Instead of striving to make your life count, raise your empty hands toward heaven in faith, and let God fill them. And then rejoice, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Amen.