

The Covenant Pulpit



PURSUING THE HEART OF GOD

"David, a man after God's Heart"

"THE FATHER'S HEART"

2 Samuel 18&19

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His name was Hadley. His once-promising life had been ravaged by years of drinking cheap booze. But God's grace met this drunken bum in the Bowery, one of New York City's worst hellholes.

After he was converted, he thought he might become an evangelist. But he lacked the education and eloquence. When he did share his faith, his words were clumsy and confusing. But Hadley could pray. And he could weep. It seemed like he was always shedding tears.

Folks took to calling him "Weeping Hadley." One night, as he walked the mean streets of the Bowery, he was overwhelmed by the human wreckage that lay in drunken stupor all around him. He grabbed hold of a lamppost, and began to weep uncontrollably. Then he cried out an anguished prayer,

"Lord, give me New York or I die!"

The world hardly knows that Hadley existed. No one will ever rank this inarticulate former drunk among the great evangelists. All he ever did was pray and weep for his city. But he may have sparked the greatest revival in American history.

A few days later, a smiling businessman began to pass out handbills advertising a one-hour prayer meeting every Wednesday at noontime in the North Dutch Church on the corner of Fulton and William Streets. No preachers were allowed. It was open only to laypeople.

Within weeks the meeting at the Dutch Church on Fulton Street had multiplied into noontime prayer meetings across the city. The concerts of prayer had these things in common: they were attended by businessmen, no preachers were allowed, the prayers were focused on revival in America, people wept, and nominal churchgoers who attended were getting saved.

They had plenty to weep about. America was enjoying the greatest prosperity in her history. People were caught up in materialism in 1857. Churches were empty. Young people wanted nothing to do with religion. Alcoholism and crime were rampant. Slavery was a moral blight on America, and politicians were pushing the country toward civil war.

Was it just coincidence that, a month after those New York City businessmen began to pray against materialism in America, that the great bank panic of October 1857 struck? Within days the banking system of America imploded. Historians still scratch their heads over the collapse of 1857. There was no economic reason for it. Could it have been caused by the weeping prayers of God's people for revival? One thing is sure: desperate folks began to flock to churches across America.

Within two months, the banking crisis was over. But millions of lives were ruined and thousands of businesses ravaged. And the revival was just getting started. Though businessmen were now packing out prayer

meetings in New York City, the revival came first to Hamilton, Ontario and then across Canada as thousands came to Christ. It next spread among slaves in South Carolina. Black itinerate preachers held revival meetings in Charleston, and thousands showed up. Among those led to the Lord by these black preachers were hundreds of white folk.

But New York City was the epicenter of this revival. Within a year after the first Wednesday prayer meeting at the Dutch Church on Fulton Street, ten thousand businessmen were crowding into packed noontime prayer meetings across the city! Most of these evangelistic prayer meetings were being led by Calvinistic Dutch and Presbyterian laymen. Churches were filled to overflowing on Sundays. The crime rate dropped down to almost nothing—in New York City!

As the revival spread to Boston and across the Northeast, there were 50,000 conversions a week. The famous newspaper publisher Horace Greeley reported about a ship that entered New York Harbor during the revival of 1857-1858. A businessman, returning from a noon prayer meeting, told the captain about what was happening in New York. Though the crew was looking forward to heading off to seafront debaucheries after a long transatlantic voyage, the skipper gathered them together to listen to the businessman. Flush from his hour of prayer, he spoke passionately about their need to receive Christ. The whole crew fell to their knees and cried out to God for salvation. Such was the power of noontime weeping and prayer.

Of America's three Great Awakenings, this was the greatest. During its peak, there were 50,000 conversions a week and ten thousand people were being baptized every Sunday! Before it was over, about 1.5 million people were converted. There are some who believe that the bank panic of 1857, that turned Americans from materialism to spirituality, was a result of those New York noontime prayer meetings. Others would argue that their fervent prayers for the abolition of slavery, and God's cleansing of America, was answered in the Civil War some four years later.

Who would have believed that a former drunk, hanging on a lamppost in the Bowery, and weeping for his lost city, might have started the greatest revival in American history and changed the course of a nation! After 150 years, could it happen again—if only we would weep and pray for a city, nation, and people who are lost in sin?

In 2 Samuel 18 we see one of the saddest scenes in literature. It is Shakespearian in its tragedy. King David has just survived a civil war, but his son Absalom, the leader of the rebellion, has been killed. Every father and mother who have ever watched helplessly while their children destroyed their lives, know the heart wrenching grief of David's lament in 2 Samuel 18:33:

"O my son Absalom! My son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!"

David might as well have been clinging to a lamppost in the Bowery weeping with Hadley for the lost sons and daughters of God. Do you hear an echo of David's anguish for Absalom in the lament of Jesus as he looks down at Jerusalem on the eve of his crucifixion?

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."

—Matthew 23:37

Or do you hear the echo of the prophet Jeremiah? He wanders through Jerusalem after the Babylonian destruction and he cries out in anguish,

"This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears. No one is near to comfort me, no one to restore my spirit. My children are destitute because the enemy has prevailed."

—Lamentations 1:14

If you look closely, you will see that each of these is the lament of a parent over lost children? In these laments you see the heart of our Father in heaven. When did you last weep for the lost sons and daughters of God? Have you ever wept for Naples? Could you say, "Give me Naples, or I die!?" In David's weeping over his lost son, I see something of the heart also possessed by Jeremiah, Jesus, Hadley, and ten thousand businessmen who gathered every day in New York City to pray for the lost children of God. Here is a principle for all those who pursue the heart of God:

**You cannot fully possess God's heart
without grieving for his lost children.**

In our last episode of *Pursuing the Heart of God* we saw that a heart of holiness has a hatred for sin. But if we only hate sin and what it does to its victims, that only qualifies us to be angry, self-righteous judges. We must go beyond hatred to sorrow. And beyond sorrow to compassion. And beyond Compassion to action. We will never reach out in mercy to the Absalom's of this world, until we have first wept for the fact that they are lost in their sins. There is not a single revival in history that didn't begin with weeping saints praying for lost sinners. Until we can say with Hadley, "Give me Naples or I die!" or we can say with David, "If only I had died instead of you!" we will never see a spiritual revival that brings life to the Father's dead children. Maybe the true truths in this tragic story of Absalom will help us:

1. THE GREAT PRETENDER: ABSALOM'S REBELLION.

Remember, Absalom is crown prince. He strikingly handsome looks and charismatic leadership make him the darling of the nation. At birth, his father David christened him Absalom. It is a combination of two Hebrew words that mean "the father of peace." David had been a man of war,

establishing his rule through bloodshed. But he had high hopes that his son Absalom would establish a reign of peace and prosperity in Israel. How ironic that he should grow up to plunge the nation into a bloody civil war.

David had wept for wayward Absalom for years. When you examine the life of this prodigal son, you cannot help weep too. When you understand that Absalom is the face of fallen humanity, you will weep even more. Look at the four stages of his descent into destruction.

1) FROM INJUSTICE TO INSURRECTION

We first notice Absalom after David's adulterous affair with Bathsheba. There is nothing more terrible than children's disillusionment with a father who has disappointed them, and David's family disintegrates into rebellion. Remember, he has taken on many wives and concubines, so he has a blended family full of half-brothers and sisters. 2 Samuel 13 tells the sordid story of incest. One of David's son's Amnon rapes his half-sister Tamar. Her brother Absalom is incensed. He appeals to his father David to punish Amnon for this brutal crime, but David does nothing. Perhaps he is still paralyzed by the guilt of his brutality against Bathsheba and her husband.

Absalom is again disillusioned by his father's injustice. So he takes the law into his own hands and kills his half-brother to avenge his sister's rape. To his shock and dismay, David sends *him* off into exile. During his banishment, Absalom broods in bitterness. Later his father allow the crown prince to return to Jerusalem, but he is under virtual house arrest. Absalom sees all of this as monstrously unjust and unfair, and rebellion begins to fester in his wounded soul.

You and I might agree with Absalom's assessment of David's justice. But remember, even though David is flawed, he is still God's anointed. We may not agree with how our Father in heaven chooses to run his world, but he is still our sovereign God. The archangel Lucifer didn't like the way God ruled in heaven, so, in his pride, he instigated the first civil war in history. Adam and Eve didn't agree with God's rules in Paradise, so they ate the forbidden fruit and became the world's first rebels. Cain didn't like the way God favored his brother's sacrifice, so he became the first murderer when he killed Abel. The beginning of all insurrection is a sense of injustice; a pride that says we know better than our Father; Absalom's certainty that he would run things better. And so we declare our freedom from God's restrictive and unfair rule and become the master of our own lives. This is the root of all sin that has filled the world with bloodshed, suffering, and tears.

2) CONSPIRACY BORN OF CYNICISM

The plot thickens. Look at 2 Samuel 15. Absalom sits by the gates of Jerusalem. There he calls out to passersby who have come to the royal city looking for justice and have gone away discouraged. He whispers to each on in verse four, "If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone

who has a complaint or case could come to me, and I would see that he gets justice." There has always been a "Spirit of Absalom" in this universe. The cynic who is disillusioned with authority, begins to whisper dissension in the ears of the discontent. It is as old as Lucifer whispering rebellion in the ears of angels who will later fall with him. Later the same Lucifer becomes the serpent that whispers like Absalom in Eve's ear, "This Garden is one forbidden fruit shy of a paradise. But if listen to me instead of your Father in heaven, it will become a true paradise."

Beware of the cynic who has lost faith in his or her Father. I recall my daughter's turmoil when two religion professors set out to destroy her faith at Texas Christian University. One was an Oxford Don who had lost his faith, and the other was a Methodist minister turned Buddhist priest. Having lost faith in their Father in heaven, they were determined to enlist as many college students as possible in their rebellion. Add to them cynical pastors who lead parishioners astray, or cynical Christians who put their arms around excited new Christians and say, "Don't get too fanatical about your faith, too optimistic about answered prayers, or too carried away with evangelizing your friends." The Absalom spirit is alive in those who stir up dissension in families, among friends, and in churches. It is conspiracy and rebellion born of cynicism. It is enough to make you want to weep.

3) DEPRAVITY MAKES ITS DECLARATION

Absalom weaves his web and the nation turns to him. Civil war ensues. David flees the city and is a fugitive on the run. If you turn to 2 Samuel 16 you will see a sight that horrifies and disgusts. Upon the advise of his advisors, Absalom pitches a tent on the roof of his father's deserted palace, and proceeds to rape the king's wives and concubines. It was a common practice among the pagan kings of the ancient world. When they conquered a kingdom, they would go into the defeated king's harem and sleep with their wives as a statement of dominance. It was their arrogant and mocking way of saying, "I am now in complete control of this kingdom."

As you gasp in horror at this debauchery, focus on the words of 2 Samuel 16:21, "...Then all Israel will hear that you have made yourself a stench in your father's nostrils, and the hands of everyone with you will be strengthened." Is this not a picture of our postmodern world? We too have gone to our rooftops where everyone can see, and engaged in debaucheries that would make our grandparents blush. Are we trying to become a stench in our heavenly Father's nostrils? Is it our way of saying that we no longer fear the King of heaven, or that we have taking over the kingdom of heaven and made it the kingdom of men? Absalom is saying to his father, "I have done the ultimate evil against you, and you are impotent to do anything about it." And we mock God by doing that which is evil in his sight. Like Absalom, the lost children of the heavenly Father do that which is shameful without shame. Like the Israelites, we gather at the base of the palace and applaud the celebrities who and Jerry Springer crazies who have gone to the rooftops of our cities and publicly mocked a holy God.

4) PRIDE GETS CAUGHT IN A TREE

The fortunes of civil war turn and the father now has the upper hand. The Father in heaven will never allow his kingdom to be possessed by rebels. In the decisive battle, King David cries out to his generals in 2 Samuel 18:5, "Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake." This father, and the Father in heaven, never stops loving his lost and rebellious children. But, when the battle turns against him, Absalom mounts his donkey and flees in terror. As he is racing under a tree, his long, luxurious hair gets caught in the low-hanging branches. He has always been proud of his head of hair, but today it will be the death of him. As he hangs suspended by his hair, David's top general Joab rides up. Ignoring David's earlier command to spare Absalom, the hardened old general, brutally thrusts three spears into the crown prince and the rebel dies. This is the end of all lost children of the heavenly Father. Adam and Eve got hung up in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and it was their death. Judas betrayed his Lord, and he hanged himself from a tree. And so Deuteronomy 21:23 declares, "Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree." The sentence of God is pronounced on all pride and rebellion against him: you will hang by your pride until you die. Look at Absalom and weep, for you see the fate of every lost child of God who is in your family, neighborhood, city, and church.

2. THE TWO FACES OF GRIEF: DAVID'S DOUBLE SORROW.

The word of Absalom's death comes to his grieving father. In all of literature there are no more heart wrenching words than 2 Samuel 18:33, "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom my son, my son!" I see two faces of grief here:

1) THE TEARS OF THE SAVIOR

There is no greater picture of Jesus in all of the Old Testament than King David. Again we see the tears of our Father in heaven. Listen again to David's words: "If only I had died instead of you!" Do you see the heart of your heavenly Father. David's cry is only the wishful thinking of a grieving human father. But our heavenly Father could and did what David couldn't do. His Only Begotten Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, came to earth and did die in the place of his rebellious and lost children. When you hear Jesus cry over the lost city of David, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often have I longed to gather your children together..." (Matthew 23:37) You have not fully possessed the heart of your heavenly Father until your heart is broken for the lost, and until you are willing to enter a Jerusalem (or New York City, or Naples) and bring salvation to them. David said it: "If only I had died instead of you!" Jesus said it: "I will die instead of you!" Are we willing to say like Hadley, "Give me Naples, or I die."? It may begin with an hour of prayer every day. It might be dying to self-pride and being willing to risk being thought a fanatic by your neighbor. But you have not taken up your cross in obedience to Jesus until you are willing to die for the lost.

2) THE TEARS OF THE SINNER

David's tears are also the tears of a sinner. Though David is one of the great pictures of Christ, he is also one of the greatest sinners in the Bible. It almost seems like an oxymoron. How can we be both a picture of Christ and a sinner, all wrapped up in the same person? That's exactly what we all are! David's grief is not only for the ruin of his son, it for his complicity in his boy's destruction. Did he not grieve that his own adultery and murderous cover-up had set in motion the chain of tragic events that had led to Absalom's tragedy? I wonder if he made his way to the tree where his son hung by his hair, spears thrusting from his side? Did he cry out, "It was my sins that hung him on that tree!"? Do you see another son hanging on another tree—a soldier's spear thrust into his wounded side? Does it make you want to weep as you cry out, "It was my sins that hung him on that tree!"? This is what transforms judgmental anger to compassionate tears.

3. A TALE OF TWO TREES: THE HANGING OF TWO SONS.

The parallels between the two trees are stunning. Absalom means "the father of peace." But he becomes the son of pride. Jesus comes because the heavenly Father wants to make peace with his rebellious children. David cries out to his soldiers, "Don't hurt my son. I don't want to lose him" God cries out from heaven, "I have given up my Son to be crucified." Absalom mounts a donkey and flees. Jesus mounts a donkey and rides into the crucible of pain and suffering. Absalom gets hung in the tree by his pride. Jesus hangs on his tree in humility. Absalom is crucified because of rebellion. Jesus is crucified because of obedience. Both are stabbed by a soldier's spear. Absalom is buried in shame. Jesus rises in glory. Absalom's death on the tree breaks his father's heart. Jesus' death on a tree pleases his Father's heart. If it were not for the Son of the heavenly Father being willing to be cursed on a tree, all of the sons and daughters of lost men and women would be cursed like Absalom. This is the gospel of salvation.

I believe that David weeps for two people in this passage. He weeps for his lost son. But he also weeps for his personal loss. I think that he also weeps for the shame he has brought to his heavenly Father by his own actions that set in motion these tragic consequences. Jesus grieved too. He grieved for lost sons and daughters. He also grieved for himself in Gethsemane when he struggled with the suffering he would endure on the cross. He also grieved for the pain that his heavenly Father endured at the hands of his rebellious children.

We live in a world of grief. We too will shed tears. Mostly we will shed tears for our own pain and suffering. But will our heart break for God's lost children? Will we agonize over our heavenly Father's wounded heart? Hadley was not an eloquent evangelist. All he could do was weep and pray. But that made all the difference in the world!