

January 22, 2017

I LIKE THOSE RESERVED SEATS

2 Samuel 15

We recently had a less than ideal day. I know you'll find this hard to believe, but it involved an airline trip. It was on the day we flew to Seattle to attend the memorial service for Laurie's mom. That right there makes for a tough day, but it got worse. I told you before that it started with me forgetting my wallet so we had to go back home to retrieve it because I needed ID to get on the plane. Despite all that we made it to the airport just in time for our early evening flight. But of course our flight was delayed. They initially said it would be 10 minutes late, but they weren't counting on the jumbo jet that for some reason blocked access to our gate so our plane couldn't get there. We finally pushed back from the gate almost an hour late. Then as we were taxiing to the runway we suddenly stopped. We were informed by the pilot that we were going to be delayed because of weather issues. The delay was going to be long enough that they turned off the engines. We sat on the taxiway for an hour. By the time we left we were about 2 hours behind schedule. Laurie's sister was supposed to pick up their brother a half hour or so before we landed, wait for us, then pick us up also and take us to our hotel. We finally texted her to not worry about us because we would be getting in so late. We would just rent a car.

That would have been merely annoying except for one other factor. Seated directly behind me was a little girl maybe 3 years old whose name was Beelzebub. Okay, I don't really know what her name was, but this child was the devil. She was all right until they buckled her into her seat. What followed was like something out of *The Exorcist*. This child began screaming, whining, kicking the seat in front of her (my seat), and making unearthly, demonic sounds. And it continued almost non stop pretty much the entire 4 hours of the flight. I normally have great tolerance for kids and dogs. This was light years outside of normal. What a relief it was to get off that plane and be far from Lucifer's daughter. But now we had to go to the car rental facility at the Sea-Tac airport to pick up the car we had rented. By the time we got there it was after 11 PM. The facility has an enormous hall with spaces for what seems like dozens of car rental companies. They were all completely empty except for one, the one we had a reservation with. At our agency there was a long line. We endured the line, finally got through the tedious process of renting the vehicle, after some wandering located the car and tried to drive out. Unfortunately there was a problem with the brakes of the vehicle. I alerted an employee to the problem and after checking it out he said, "You'd better take it back and get a different car." Back we went and finally got a different car. By this time we were

starving because we had eating nothing since a light lunch in the middle of the day. Do you know how hard it is to find a restaurant open at midnight in a strange city? We ended up eating at McDonald's at midnight. Yeah, it was a great day. We finally got to our hotel at 1:15 AM.

Today we are going to look at an event in David's life that made our bad day look like child's play, if you'll excuse the expression. What happened to him was truly awful, but we will see him respond remarkably. Perhaps we can learn from his example as we consider the events of 2 Samuel 15.

ABSALOM PLOTTED A COUP

Remember that David had a weakness for women that led him to have a large stable of wives and mistresses and caused his terrible failure with Bathsheba and Uriah. One result of this was he had lots of children by these women. This meant he was something less than the ideal father.

We all have different capacities. I recall a conversation I had with a friend when Toby was nearing the end of his high school years in which I said it was a good thing that Toby was our last child. I was getting tired as a parent and I feared that had there been another one coming behind Toby that kid would have been getting away with everything. I felt like I was running out of parental gas.

1 Chronicles 3 says David had 19 sons by his wives. It doesn't tell us how many daughters he had, but it is fair to assume it was a similar number. But then verse 9 says, "in addition to all these sons David had sons by his concubines." That means he likely had a minimum of 30 to 40 children with his wives, plus another group of kids with his mistresses. I have no problem accepting that he had a lot more parental bandwidth than I did, but no matter how great his capacity at some point the number of children he had exceeded it. A dad is simply not going to be able to give 40 or 50 kids the attention, love and discipline they need. In fact he probably would have trouble just remembering all their names unless he went the George Foreman approach and gave them all the same name. Sadly, it appears that David's bandwidth in fact was totally inadequate for the task he created for himself. That is demonstrated by one of the worst stories in the Old Testament.

David had a son named Amnon. We find out in 2 Samuel 13 that this particular son when he was mostly grown developed a jumbo sized crush on a young lady named Tamar. This was a sick deal, because Tamar was one of his half sisters. She was a daughter of David and a wife who was not Amnon's mother. She was the full sister of another of David's sons, Absalom. One scholar I read claimed that Amnon

appeared on the Jerry Springer show, but I have been unable to confirm this. Amnon, apparently had an overdose of hormones, so he cooked up a scheme to satisfy his raging lust. He lured unsuspecting Tamar into a private room with him and despite her best efforts to resist him, he raped her.

Sadly Amnon was yet another example of the truth that the apple doesn't fall very far from the tree. Can you think of anyone in the Bible who acted on his powerful lust to do a despicable thing? Let's see, let me think. Oh, wait, I know. David did that, right? Apparently Amnon was sort of following in the footsteps of his father. If you see a woman you want, just take her, no matter how wrong it is.

What did David do to take care of poor Tamar? Nothing. Zero punishment for Amnon, so not only was Tamar violated by her half brother, in a sense she was also violated by her own father when he did nothing to deal with the terrible wrong that had been committed against her. It is hard to accept, but David did absolutely nothing about the crime. Imagine how that felt to Tamar.

Her full brother, Absalom, was enraged. He bided his time, but he did not forget for even a moment what Amnon had done. Two years later he invited all of his brothers, including Amnon, to a big party. The whole thing was nothing but a plot to get Amnon in a vulnerable position. During the party Absalom ordered his servants to attack Amnon and kill him. Then Absalom got out of town, fearing retribution. He would eventually return, but was estranged from David for years.

This is part of the awful fallout of David's own terrible choices. But one of the results of this incident was it contributed to a deep resentment in Absalom for his own father. It convinced him that his father didn't deserve to be king because he did not stand for justice. He refused to punish terrible crimes that demanded some sort of punishment. In that day one of the primary tasks of a king was to be a judge, to stand for justice. In Absalom's mind David was utterly unable to fulfill that role. He convinced himself that this was probably the way David dealt with everyone, so people coming to him for help, for justice, went away sadly disappointed. David needed to be removed from the throne. But who would replace him? The obvious candidate was a son of the king who had shown that he was both willing and capable to bring about justice. And that was Absalom.

What happens in this chapter is not solely a direct result of the events involving Tamar. But that was the most egregious in what was perceived by Absalom as a long history of failure as a dad on David's part. David simply had not been there to invest in his children to the extent they longed for. His lack of action in Tamar's

case did great harm to Tamar, Amnon and Absalom. That lack of love, attention and discipline created a lot of pain in some of them, Absalom included. That kind of failure can produce a lot of bitterness. In this chapter the bitterness bears fruit.

Absalom was convinced that he would make a better king than his father. We can play amateur psychologist and try to parse out how much of his motivation was driven by resentment toward a father who failed him, but there is not much point in that. What we do know is that Absalom was quite full of himself. Chapter 14 tells us that he was the most handsome man in all of Israel. Absalom thought he was all that. So finally he began acting on his pride and bitterness.

He provided himself with a fancy limousine and a huge posse so when he traveled around town everyone would notice him. They would all know that this was somebody important. Tall and good looking, surely this was the perfect man to be king elect. Then he would talk to people who were heading toward the palace about how inadequate the current administration was. Did the king really care about his people? Did he really stand for justice? It sure didn't look like it, because from where Absalom stood it seemed no one was getting their concerns taken care of by the king.

You can imagine how this was going. Absalom seized on every perceived weakness or failing and magnified it. He harped on those failings all day long so pretty soon all people could see were problems and failures. People began to get indignant over all the injustice and lack of concern for the populace on David's part. In contrast, talking to Absalom they could see his compassion, his wisdom and his discernment. They could see how deeply he cared about them, and he was sure to let them see his frustration over his inability to do anything to help them because of his lack of authority. They felt good about themselves as they talked to him, and their dissatisfaction with David grew to a boiling point.

Behind the scenes Absalom was building a coalition of supporters. He stoked the fires of dissatisfaction. No doubt he played the generation card, convincing younger, powerful men near his own age that it was time for a change. David was the old generation, the past, and it was time for new blood, new visionary leadership. After 4 years of this he had his infrastructure and support in place, and he acted. He went to Hebron, the previous capital, and there he had himself declared king. The announcement was made, "Absalom is king in Hebron" according to verse 10. He was openly in rebellion, seeking to usurp the throne from his own father.

DAVID TOOK APPROPRIATE MEASURES

At that point it appeared to David that he had no choice but to get out of town. There was likely a lot of confusion. Who had joined Absalom's coup attempt? Who was still loyal to David? There was no way to know for sure, but the early returns made it sound like David's cause was already lost. It seemed like everyone had gone over to Absalom's side. So David left Jerusalem to go to a defensible fortress where he could regroup and plan his next steps.

David wasn't stupid. He knew this act on the part of one of his sons was going to lead to armed conflict. Remember that after David's horrible actions with Bathsheba and Uriah God had told him his family would be divided by one of his own children, that the sword would never depart from his house. That was now coming true. David could have simply abdicated the throne and exiled himself to try to stay safe, but I suspect he knew that Absalom would be a disaster as a king. Plus he also knew that Absalom would never feel secure on the throne until David was dead. Knowing that war was going to break out and that his life was threatened David took steps to protect himself and put some intelligence assets in place to aid him in his defense.

Zadok, the chief priest, was loyal to David and wanted to go with him, bringing the ark of the covenant along. But David told him to remain in Jerusalem along with the ark. This was mostly out of concern for Zadok but David also had a plan. He asked the priest to use his sons as couriers and to deliver messages to him on the plans and movements of Absalom. Thus he had a highly placed intelligence source in Jerusalem.

There was also a wise advisor named Hushai that David asked to stay with Absalom. One of David's closest and smartest advisors, Ahithophel, had gone over to the dark side. He had joined the Absalom insurrection as an advisor to the new king wannabe. Hushai wanted no part of the rebellion, but David also sent him back. He asked him to use his influence to thwart Absalom's plans. So David was gathering his forces and put in place some intelligence assets who could both provide him with human intelligence about Absalom's plans and an asset who could be actively involved in creating problems for the upstart coup leader.

DAVID REFUSED TO BE LIKE SAUL

Saul had been a major negative influence on David, especially early in his life when Saul made life miserable for David. David could easily have played the role of Saul in Absalom's life. David is to Absalom as Saul was to David. We can see

in this passage a couple of ways that David chose to be different than Saul. The first had to do with the way he related to people.

Saul was all about Saul. We saw that he was obsessed with protecting himself and keeping a firm grasp on power. Nothing mattered to him outside those goals. This was so true that Saul had no concern for other people. He would use them to their own detriment without any regret as long as it served his purpose. He actually tried to use his own daughter and his son to help him keep control of his power, instead of loving them. He killed Abiathar, a priest who was loyal to him, merely because the priest innocently helped David when he thought that was what Saul wanted.

In this passage we see David refusing to do that. Among the people who followed David, thus putting themselves at risk when the fighting began, was a man named Ittai. He was the leader of 600 men who were Philistines from the city of Gath. In the period where David was being hounded by Saul he spent some time in Gath. During that time Ittai and his men had developed such loyalty to David that when David left to return to Israel they went with him. They stood with him when he was running from Saul and they fought for him in the civil war that occurred after the death of Saul. They had been with David ever since. Now that David was fleeing for his life, they went with him. In verses 19-21 David told them to go back to Jerusalem. At that point David thought the likely outcome was that he would be killed, and anyone who sided with him was in serious danger. He essentially said to Ittai and his men, "This isn't your fight. Stay out of it and stay safe. May God bless you." Ittai and his men wanted no part of that. They insisted on sticking with David come what may, even if it cost them their lives.

David did the same thing with Zadok, the priest. He told him to stay in Jerusalem and to keep the ark there. David would not use the ark to bolster his claim to the throne, and he wanted the priest to stay out of the fighting. The point here is that at a time when David needed all hands on deck he was telling these influential people to abandon him and keep themselves safe. Where Saul would sacrifice anything and anyone to maintain his security and his power, David was trying to send people away in order to protect them.

Another example is Absalom himself. Where Saul would do anything to kill David, who was no threat to him, while Absalom was a deadly threat to David in 2 Samuel 18:5 as his troops were heading out against the rebel forces David told his commanders, "be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake." He was trying to protect him, not kill him.

However, the heart of the difference between Saul and David appears in verses 25-26. David said to Zadok, “Take the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the Lord’s eyes, he will bring me back and let me see it and his dwelling place again. But if he says, ‘I am not pleased with you,’ then I am ready; let him do to me whatever seems good to him.” I believe that is the key verse in this whole story. David did not have a death grip on his position as king. He wasn’t even totally obsessed with his own safety. He only wanted to be king if God wanted him to be king.

David was not focused on getting or keeping what he wanted in this world. He was focused on doing God’s will above all else. His whole attitude is summed up in the last phrase of his statement to Zadok. “Let him do to me whatever seems good to him.” If he wants me to live, then I’m good with that, but if he wants me to die then so be it. If he wants me to be king then I am happy to serve as king. But if he doesn’t and he wants Absalom to be king then I willingly accept that. All I care about is whatever God chooses to do.

Do you remember when Jesus told the disciples, “My food is to do the will of my Father”? David is pretty much living out that truth here. He has failed at times in the past, pretty spectacularly on one occasion, but this was the heart of the man. It was why God said David was a man after his heart. He lived with the purpose, “I only want what God wants.” Saul got into serious trouble and made life difficult for other people because he lived with the purpose, “I only want what I want.” And he would do anything to get it.

Fortunately the situation was not as dire as it might have appeared during the early panicky hours of the crisis. Notice that verse 23 tells us, “The whole countryside wept aloud as all the people passed by.” The people who were passing by were the forces loyal to David. As they were leaving they had to be reassured by the fact that though Absalom had gathered a cadre of supporters, some of them powerful people, he had not won over the people of Israel. Most of them were still loyal to David and were devastated by the thought that he might be replaced by Absalom.

IMPLICATIONS

REBELLION IS STANDARD EQUIPMENT FOR FALLEN HUMAN NATURE

In his book *A Tale Of Three Kings*, Gene Edwards at one point wrote, “There is no kingdom without discord.” His assertion is that no matter where you look in the human race you will find dissension and division. Somewhere a rebellion will be brewing. He asserts that this is everywhere in humanity. Rebellion is embedded in the heart of fallen human nature.

Sadly our experience bears this out. It might be below the surface, but it will be there. Someone will be doing just what Absalom did in Israel. He will be drawing attention to the shortcomings and failures of whoever is in charge. He will highlight and magnify those failings and will dwell on them so that he convinces his audience that there is no hope under the current regime. There is only failure and unfairness everywhere they look.

There is an Absalom just about everywhere and he will find a willing audience when he does his work. This is because the heart of rebellion is self. It will always be dressed in noble, just, maybe even compassionate clothing, but it is really about self. It goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. It is a function of the lie that the tempter sold Eve. Don't you want to be like God? Yes, I do. In fact, I'd like to be God. That one lie has utterly and horribly distorted the human heart. It leads to the rebellious spirit that says I know better. I should be in charge. I don't care what I do to whoever might be in charge because that person needs to be replaced by me. It is that spirit that causes us to be continually playing the Absalom to other people, noting all the problems with them, judging them to be unacceptable, knowing that we surely are better than they, sitting in judgment on them.

I had a friend when I was in seminary who was a terrific guy with a great heart. He was one of the groomsmen when Laurie and I got married. After we graduated he took on the role of being the pastor of a struggling church. I was a little concerned for my friend stepping into that role because it looked to me at the time like a hopeless cause. The church had a history of grinding up pastors mercilessly. But under his leadership the church began to turn around. It got healthier, new people started coming and the church was growing to the point where they had to bring on a new staff member to help. I did not hear from him for some time, so I was stunned when I heard several years later that the church had let him go. My friend had an encounter with the rebellion in the human heart. He had his own personal Absalom. The staff member they hired at gone on an underground campaign of highlighting my friend's weaknesses and failings. He had totally undercut him and eventually fomented a rebellion that led to my friend being ousted from his own ministry. The guy who undermined him was not an evil villain. He was a human being who had convinced himself he was doing what was best for the church.

I had my own encounter with this reality. More than a decade ago in the church I served at the time we had a retreat for the elders and staff. This retreat was to be part spiritual renewal and part strategic planning. It didn't go as planned. I was stunned when the whole thing was hijacked by another staff member who in the

middle of the first session launched an attack on me in an effort to turn the entire thing into a witch hunt, with me as the witch. The weekend turned into a “dis” weekend for me. I was dissed, but more to the point it was disappointing, discouraging, and dismaying in the extreme. The most dismaying thing about it was that this was a person whom I had thought was a friend. David’s situation was worse because it wasn’t merely a friend, it was his own son, that did it to him.

WE MUST CHOOSE BETWEEN ABSALOM’S WAY AND DAVID’S WAY

What was Absalom’s way? It was similar to the way of Saul early in David’s life. Absalom’s way was that he determined what was best and he would do whatever was necessary to bring it about. David’s way was very different. It was to let God determine what was best and then trust him to bring it about.

If you think back to David’s experience with Saul you will see that he learned that way of living through those experiences. On more than one occasion David had the opportunity to determine that it would be best if Saul were killed and David took the throne, and to make that happen. Instead he refused to take matters into his own hands and bring about what seemed like the desired end. He trusted God to work in his own way and time.

Does this mean being totally passive? Are we supposed to just pray and then sit quietly waiting for God to do something? It may be that at times that’s what we are to do, but David was rarely passive. In his experiences with Saul he was usually moving around, finding places he could stay safely away from Saul’s reach. In this episode with Absalom he didn’t stay in his palace and do nothing as he waited for God to act. He evacuated to a safe place and put his intelligence plan into effect. He was active. But this situation was about what was in his heart. What was in his heart was trust in God’s will. He left the outcome to God. If it was God’s time for him to no longer be king, then he would accept that. If it was his time for him to die, then so be it. The result would be totally up to God, but in the meantime David took rational precautions to protect himself.

We have been praying about Michael’s transition out of the military. We have desired that he would be able to get a job as an airline pilot and that he and Carissa could move to this area. That is our desire. But we have to approach it with David’s attitude. If God wants him to get such a job then wonderful, but if not we accept whatever God wants to do with him. In the meantime, as all of us trust God, what was Michael to do? Was he to wait passively for God to drop an airline job in his lap? No, he needed to act rationally. He needed to apply for those jobs and do

all the preparation, of which there was a surprisingly large amount, necessary to get the job. He has done that, and he has been tentatively offered one.

Why is it important that we learn to have David's attitude of leaving the outcomes of God? I can cite two reasons. First it is essential to being at peace in life. Think back to Saul. Would you say he was at peace? The poor man was basically out of his mind. He was threatened by things and people that in fact were no threat to him. He was freaked out and paranoid because of threats that existed only in his mind. He was so desperate to hang onto power that he never had even a moment of peace. Absalom had something in common with him, for he was not at peace either. What a contrast David provides here. He was able to respond to a dire situation with remarkable calm because all that mattered to him was what God wanted.

The second reason for David's way is it allowed him to be at peace in his relationships. Saul destroyed his relationship to David, who wanted nothing but to be loyal to him, because of his obsession with holding on to what he wanted. Saul also seriously damaged his relationship with his own son, Jonathan, and ended up using his own daughter without regard to her well being because of his insistence on having his way. Absalom obviously also destroyed his relationship with his own dad because of his rebellious spirit. Living Absalom's way is guaranteed to damage other people and cause us to experience nothing but dysfunction in our relationships with them.

In some ways I think of these two approaches to life as being a little like the difference between boarding a flight on Southwest Airlines and boarding one on Delta Airlines. As you know Southwest doesn't assign seats. This means if you are traveling with a companion you must do everything within your power to somehow find your way into boarding group A. To end up in group C is disaster. You may well not get seats together, and what seats you get will be the ones no one else wants. In other words, you likely will end up in the dreaded middle seat between two strangers, one or both of whom will quite possibly be entirely too large to fit into one airline seat, meaning you will be uncomfortably squeezed. Even before the groups are called to board the jockeying begins. The other people on the flight are the enemy. There is no peace, and there is precious little cooperation. There is only the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest, first come, first served, you snooze, you lose. In other words you are not relaxed and at peace, and you are not loving other people. Ah, but when you board that Delta flight you have assigned seats. Even there people get antsy, they subtly move for position, fearful that somehow they are going to be cheated in some way. Perhaps there

won't be a space to put their carry on bag in the overhead bin. I started to feel that on our recent flight to Seattle, but then I reminded myself of the truth. No matter how many people got on that plane before us none of them could take our seats because the airline had reserved them for us. And if there was no space in the overhead bin for our carry on bags it wasn't our problem, the crew would have to figure out a solution. It wasn't up to me. So all those other people were really no threat at all.

So it is when we live David's way. God is going to get us to the outcome he desires for us no matter what people may do. So we can relax, be at peace, not be threatened by people and compete with them. We can just care about them, safe in the knowledge that we are in God's loving and wise hands.

What will enable us to choose well? Confidence in God's love, his power and his wisdom. It means knowing that God wants what is best for us and is able to bring it about. David displayed that in this episode, but also in his writings. His most famous Psalm expresses exactly this attitude. Psalm 23:1-3 says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul." In verse 6 he says, "Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life." David saw himself being like the sheep. I know the shepherd is looking out for me and will take care of me. All I need to do is follow him, just go where he takes me and I'll be good.

The second thing, though, that is required to live David's way is acceptance of God's wisdom and will. In other words, I've got to be willing to follow. All that stuff about green pastures and quiet waters sounds great. We're more than willing to follow the shepherd to those places. But then we read Psalm 23:4. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil." Some older translations had "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." The NIV is probably more literally accurate, but the older way was poetically more powerful and possibly caught the feel of the author. Picture the sheep following the shepherd until coming to a dark and ominous valley, the valley of the shadow of death, and saying, "Wait a minute. You want me to go there? Shadow of death? I don't think so. Better get yourself another sheep.' Yeah, we're great with that green pastures stuff, but when it's valley of the shadow of death time we bail out. For us to go David's way, to have peace in life and with other people, means accepting the Shepherd's way even if it goes through that terrifying valley.

Will we accept it and choose to trust when the Shepherd leads us into that terrifying dark valley? We have friends our age whose daughter is in her late 30's.

She has been diagnosed with 4th stage metastatic breast cancer. She will be fortunate to make it into her 40's. They are in the valley of the shadow of death, literally. What an awful place to go. They face that most difficult of questions, will they accept this and continue to trust God? Will they keep following the shepherd?

I mentioned last week that when Laurie and I were up in the Seattle area we were greatly aided by Google maps. One night we had to drive back to our hotel in Silverdale from Laurie's sister's house in Port Orchard. We put confidence in Google and faithfully followed that lady's directions. Unfortunately she took us into the valley of the shadow of death. We had followed her directions getting to the house, but for some reason on the return trip she took us a different way. She took us on this narrow, winding, totally dark road through heavy, unpopulated woods. It was obviously not the way she had taken us to Cyndi's house so why were we going this way now? I probably should have known something was up when the Google lady told me in 400 feet to turn left on Shadow of Death Road. We came to the realization that we had no idea where we were or where we were going. What if she had some nefarious scheme to take us out into the backwoods in the cold and dark and just leave us stranded there to face whatever fate might befall us? I could hear the banjos starting to duel. We had to operate totally by faith. We didn't understand where we were, why we were there or how we were going to get where needed to go. Our only hope was in Google's reliability. So we trusted Google, and accepted the instructions, nervously winding our way through the woods. And in the end she took us right back to our hotel, safe and sound. So it is with our God. He is our shepherd. He may well take us through some scary places. We could face the loss of job or a grim financial crisis, it could be a painful and disorienting relational mess, it could be a health scare or something even worse. But he will lead us where we need to go so that we arrive at our destination safe and sound.