

**“The Agony of Victory”**  
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)  
Continuing a series *A King for God’s People*

2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 18:24-33

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See the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

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It was David’s moment of victory. It was David’s moment of agony. In this — the agony and the victory — we are given to see the astonishing ways of God.

Six years earlier. . . .

Absalom came home. He’d been banished for killing his brother. But finally, his father had been persuaded to let him return. His father was King David, and Absalom was now the crown prince, the heir to the kingship of God’s People. David was glad to have his son back, but he remained conflicted. In fact, it was two years more before he could face his son. Reconciliation is hard.

For David and Absalom, reconciliation was too brief. Absalom’s resentment and ambition, and David’s recklessness and neglect, conspired together to force them apart.

Absalom thought he should be king. The sooner, the better. He had the right bloodlines. He looked the part. He acted the role. He had the energy and the drive the nation needed. He was very popular, as his father had once been.

David was wearying and wearing down. The administration of justice was floundering under his rule. David had lost his moral compass. His family had splintered into factions. Many still appreciated David because what he had done for Israel. Far fewer were loyal to him now, for what had he done lately?

Everything David had once been, Absalom was becoming. Except for one thing: God had chosen David, but not Absalom.

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Absalom launched his coup to overthrow his father from the old capital, Hebron. He marched his forces to Jerusalem, the city of David.

David left the city. We are used to David acting with initiative. Instead, David was on his heels, not sure what to do about his son.<sup>1</sup>

Absalom gathered a large army from all over Israel. Some had always remained loyal to old Saul, the king whom David had himself replaced, and now they turned on him.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 302.

Absalom's was a popular movement. David's was dwindling.

David fled with his wives, but left behind his harem. One of the first things Absalom did was take those women of his father's and make them his own. Absalom did it in public, a performance vulgar and cruel, but an effective way of announcing who was now in charge.<sup>2</sup>

And remember, David had taken another's man's wife for his own, and had that man killed. God had then warned David:

- his family would be torn by violence (check);
- his own kin would bring disaster (check);
- his wives would be shamed in public (check).<sup>3</sup>

David's son was simply and horribly following in his father's footsteps.

By almost any measure, David's days were few. Still, God continued to choose David.

### III

Absalom had all the momentum. But David had a spy on Absalom's war council. The spy sowed confusion, and Absalom gave up his advantages and waited. This gave David time to regroup, strengthen and strategize. David had more experience. So did his officers. So when it finally came, the battle was decisive and one-sided. Absalom's forces were shattered and scattered.

Before battle, David had ordered that Absalom not be harmed. Though guilty of treason and betrayal, the son was still held in his father's heart. "*Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake,*" David commanded. Everyone heard it.

At the battle's end, and as he was fleeing, Absalom got himself caught up in a tree. He hung there, by his long hair, in the air. Suspended between heaven and earth, life and death, at once both the son of a king and a rebel against the king. Helpless.<sup>4</sup>

The pursuing soldiers who found him did not know what to do. Then Joab, David's general, took charge. Joab had murdered before on the orders of his king.<sup>5</sup> Now, he murdered in defiance of his king. Yet all of it he did for his king. He threw first, and others followed. Life was torn from the son's body . . . and from his father's heart.

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<sup>2</sup> Publicly having sex with his father's concubines was, first and foremost, an exercise of royal power; the harem belonged to the king. Bueggemann, 310.

<sup>3</sup> See 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, 319.

<sup>5</sup> Joab orchestrated the death of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, on David's orders.

## IV

O my son Absalom,  
     my dear, dear son Absalom!  
 Why not me rather than you,  
     my death and not yours?  
 O Absalom,  
     my dear, dear son!

David was a poet and singer. We have heard him sing at the death of a friend and grieve the depth of his own sin.<sup>6</sup> He is adept at composition, well-schooled in performance, his words well-formed.

But here, no. No eloquence. Just words abrupt, raw, jagged. Simple. Three times the name, “*Absalom*.” Three times the love, “*my son*.” Feelings of betrayal — betrayals against David, betrayals by David. . . . every hope found and lost. . . . everything not said, every love not shared pouring into this moment.

Three times “*Absalom*.” Three times “*my son*.” One futile, hopeless plea: “*If only it were not you, but me*.” Absalom was guilty. But, David too. Who deserved more to die?

We sit with David’s cry.

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Listen to the song *David’s Lamentation*,  
 arranged by Joshua Shank and performed by the Lawrence University Viking Chorale:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sZyxYRqirE>

Another powerful (and longer) arrangement is *When David Heard*  
 by Eric Whitacre. See this performance, in two parts, by Molto Cantabile:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zOcXPeSufA>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZeU7okc6HQ>

2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 18:33 has been the inspiration for many choral pieces, at least back to the European Renaissance.

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## V

Is such sobbing fit for a king? A king who has won?

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<sup>6</sup> David’s song for Jonathan is in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 1:17-27. Psalm 51 is attributed to David, from when he was confronted with his sin against Uriah and Bathsheba. Of course, many of the Psalms are attributed to David.

Apparently Joab does not think it is. When he hears that his majesty has lost it, the general barges in and gives David an earful. A king must act better! His soldiers have won a great victory! How dare David rain tears on their parade!<sup>7</sup> Should a king act this way? Especially a king for God's People?

Or, is this precisely how the king for God's People acts? Is this perhaps David's finest moment?<sup>8</sup>

Because I'm thinking of Jesus.

He stood before the great "city of David." His city. Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, and that means "the king." Jesus, the final King for God's People. He had arrived as he said he would, as he had promised for generations.

Jesus stood there, in the midst of his battle, his own coup d'état overthrowing the powers which enslave, recruit, deceive, twist, abuse and destroy his people. King Jesus was regaining his throne.

He looked at his city, and our world in rebellion against him. He wept.

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,  
the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!  
How often I wanted to gather your children together,  
as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings,  
but you were not willing!*<sup>9</sup>

Do you hear echoes?

*O my son Absalom,  
my dear, dear son Absalom!  
Why not me rather than you,  
my death and not yours?  
O Absalom,  
my dear, dear son!*

Except Jesus took David's futile, hopeless plea — "*if only it were not you, but me.*"— and he fulfilled it. Jesus he went to our cross. He hung from our tree. Jesus, not us. Jesus' death, not ours.

With his agony came the victory. This is the King for God's People, and the astonishing way of God.

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<sup>7</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 19:1-8.

<sup>8</sup> "David enters into deep, unrestrained, unguarded grief. This is David's most distressed moment, and perhaps his greatest." Brueggemann, 323.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 23:37 (also Luke 13:34).