

The Rebel Prince

It's a habit of people to try to rate things, put them into lists, into top 10s. People have done this with not only things and places and people, but with good and evil. The ancient Christian hermits of the third century came up with the seven deadly sins, which became a kind of framework for the Catholic church, and comes up in works like Chaucer and Dante's *Inferno*. The Catholic Church divided sin into venial and mortal sins. Venial sins are supposedly not that serious, whereas mortal sins are serious and are done with full knowledge and full consent. The rabbis of Judaism have also come up with lists that supposedly boil the commands down, and show which is more serious than another.

The Bible never actually rates one sin higher than another, though it certainly points out that some sins have more serious and more damaging consequences than others. All sin is sin; all sin is against an infinitely worthy God, therefore all sin, is an infinite offence.

But we can say this: all sin contains more or less of one other sin. That is, there is one sin which is the seed and root of every other sin. In some ways, that makes it the primal sin, the first sin, sin in its most simple essential being. That sin is the sin of pride.

If we were to call sin what it is, sin is turning away from our Creator, and choosing our own way. It is seeking life for ourselves, truth, goodness and beauty in ourselves, wanting power and glory independently of God. Pride was the very first sin, and so pride is always present in every sin. Whenever you want to uproot a sin in your life, don't pluck up the leaves and stem of your behaviour. Go down to the deep core: in what way am I seeking my own way when I do this, how am I striking out for independence?

Pride was the first sin, the sin of Satan, and the Bible consistently describes what happens to those who live in pride. Pride goes before a fall.

The account of Absalom is an account of pride going before a fall. Absalom is actually a very striking picture of another rebellious proud prince, the one the Bible calls Satan, or the Devil.

First, of all, they are both princes. Absalom is the son of king David, and Satan is several times compared to royalty. In Ezekiel 28, he is addressed as the king behind the Gentile power of Tyre. In Isaiah 14, he is addressed as the king behind the city of Babylon. In Ephesians 2:2, he is called "the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience."

Second, both were known for their beauty. It was said of Absalom: "Now in all Israel there was no one who was praised as much as Absalom for his good looks. From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. (2 Samuel 14:25)

God says of Satan before he fell, Thus says the Lord GOD: "You were the seal of perfection, Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.(Ezekiel 28:12). He is also called the morning star in Isaiah 14, a comparison of great beauty. He goes on to say that it was his beauty, and his pride in his beauty that produced pride and sin in him: ¹⁷"Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor; I cast you to the ground, I laid you before kings, That they might gaze at you.(Ezekiel 28:17)

Third, both of them stole hearts and turned people against the true king. We remember reading in chapter 15 that Absalom would stand by the gate and listen to people's problems and feign sympathy with them, and then suggest that his father's rule was unjust and unfair, and that he would deliver a much better and freer life. We know that Satan told Adam and Eve that God was actually unfairly holding out on them, and wouldn't give them what they deserved. He promised Adam and Eve a better life if they followed him in rebellion. Satan stole the hearts of mankind. It is likely he did the same thing with many of the angels, as Revelation 12:3 says the dragon swept a third of the

stars with his tail, perhaps picturing Satan drawing a third of the angels to follow him.

Fourth, both of them tried to steal the throne that rightfully belonged to someone else. Absalom was not interested in inheriting the throne. Absalom wanted to remove the sitting king, his own father, through outright rebellion and treachery. The same is true of Satan. His pride in his own beauty and power led him to the five “I will statements” of Isaiah 14: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God... I will be like the Most High.’ (Isaiah 14:13–14)

So what happens to these proud princes? In 2 Samuel 18, we read of the downfall of Absalom. In fact, his entire rebellion from beginning to end lasted only seven days. The fall of the proud prince tells us of the fate of pride.

I. The Despatching of David's Army

And David numbered the people who *were* with him, and set captains of thousands and captains of hundreds over them. ²Then David sent out one third of the people under the hand of Joab, one third under the hand of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the hand of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the people, “I also will surely go out with you myself.” ³But the people answered, “You shall not go out! For if we flee away, they will not care about us; nor if half of us die, will they care about us. But *you are* worth ten thousand of us now. For you are now more help to us in the city.” ⁴Then the king said to them, “Whatever seems best to you I will do.” So the king stood beside the gate, and all the people went out by hundreds and by thousands. ⁵Now the king had commanded Joab, Abishai, and Ittai, saying, “*Deal* gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” And all the people heard when the king gave all the captains orders concerning Absalom.

David has been allowed to catch his breath, and has quickly moved his men across the Jordan and to the city of Mahanaim, a good 100 kilometres to the northeast away from Jerusalem and Absalom. He has gotten food and supplies from an ally named Shobi. He now has the advantage that the treacherous counselor Ahithophel had feared, and he is using it exactly as Ahithophel predicted. He skillfully divides his army into three, so that they can have the advantage of mobility, speed, and guerilla warfare. We don't know how many David now had; Josephus says 4000, but likely many reinforcements that were loyal to David joined him once he was in Mahanaim. He places a captain in charge of each division: Joab the general, Abishai his brother, and Ittai, David's personal bodyguard.

David wants to sally forth with his men as he used to, but he has been a sedentary king in a palace for too long. His troops are too diplomatic to make any reference to his age or infirmity, but they know he's not up to it as he used to be. They also know that to risk David is to risk total defeat, because once he is killed, the battle is over, even David's supporters lose heart and surrender. They insist he stay within the walled and fortified city of Mahanaim, while they head out to do battle.

Before they go out, David says something to these three commanders that shows the tenderness and weakness of his heart. “Please be gentle with Absalom, for my sake”. Here is the treacherous son, who is not dealing gently with his father, who is trying to murder him, and David is begging his commanders to spare Absalom.

Here is an image of warped human love, choosing sentimental family bonds over what is true and just and good. David has been permissive and undisciplined with his children because of a sentimental love that loves the children more than loving the good of the children. He so loves his children he cannot rebuke sin in them, or even administer justice upon them when they have become traitors and dangers to the whole nation. A love that no longer loves what God loves and hates what God hates, has become a warped and inappropriate love.

II. The Defeat of Absalom's Army

⁶So the people went out into the field of battle against Israel. And the battle was in the woods of Ephraim. ⁷The people of Israel were overthrown there before the servants of David, and a great slaughter of twenty thousand took place there that day. ⁸For the battle there was scattered over the face of the whole countryside, and the woods devoured more people that day than the sword devoured.

Most of the battle seems to take place in the forest to the west of Mahanaim. David's forces draw Absalom's forces into the forest. Likely David's veteran fighters attacked the Israelite army from three different sides, and panicked it into a kind of chaos. In that forest, the confused and fleeing soldiers probably lost their way, stumbled, got entangled in the undergrowth, maybe even mistakenly attacked each other in the dark of the wood and when night came on. Though David's forces are numerically smaller, they are far more experienced, and defeat whatever forces of Absalom has mustered. It seems like Absalom chose a kind of mixture of Ahithophel's counsel and Hushai's. It doesn't seem like he gathered the whole nation to battle, but he did choose to lead them out himself.

⁹Then Absalom met the servants of David. Absalom rode on a mule. The mule went under the thick boughs of a great terebinth tree, and his head caught in the terebinth; so he was left hanging between heaven and earth. And the mule which was under him went on. ¹⁰Now a certain man saw *it* and told Joab, and said, "I just saw Absalom hanging in a terebinth tree!" ¹¹So Joab said to the man who told him, "You just saw *him*! And why did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have given you ten *shekels* of silver and a belt." ¹²But the man said to Joab, "Though I were to receive a thousand *shekels* of silver in my hand, I would not raise my hand against the king's son. For in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, saying, 'Beware lest anyone *touch* the young man Absalom!' ¹³Otherwise I would have dealt falsely against my own life. For there is nothing hidden from the king, and you yourself would have set yourself against *me*."

Absalom seems to have been fleeing from David's soldiers. He was riding on a mule, which was the customary animal for the kings to ride on. We remember the great glory of Absalom's hair, the hair he would cut once a year and weigh. It seems likely, though it isn't said explicitly, that it was his large and flowing hair that caught within the thick branches of a terebinth tree. That wouldn't normally be a problem if you can just push up on your mount and disentangle yourself.

Unfortunately, Absalom's mule does what mules do, and keeps on plodding, without or without a rider. Now with the full weight of his body hanging, Absalom is either wedged between two branches, or hopelessly entangled in branches he cannot reach and cannot get to. He is trapped, and helpless.

We can't help but remember that Absalom's counselor rode his mule home and hanged himself, here is Absalom riding his mule and now has involuntarily hung himself between heaven and earth, not dead, but now awaiting death.

It is never surprising when God uses the thing proud men boast in to cause their fall and destruction. His hair was his glory, now his hair will be his downfall.

A soldier sees it, and knows Absalom is trapped. Apparently Absalom is alone, or else his men would have freed him, but this soldier of David is able to get back to his commander Joab, and tell him. Joab, who long ago had regretted bring Absalom into Jerusalem, had never intended to keep David's command to deal gently with Absalom. Likely, Joab had secretly offered his division of the army a monetary reward of ten shekels of silver to whomever killed Absalom. So Joab scolds this soldier and asks him why he didn't take care of it right there. The soldier wisely replies that he wouldn't have done it for all the silver in the world, since he had heard with his own ears King David's command not to harm Absalom. In fact, he could see that the trapped Absalom was perhaps a chance to fulfill the king's wishes: arrest Absalom and bring him to David unhurt. He also knew the kind of wily man that Joab was: if a man killed Absalom, Joab would likely throw

the man under the bus and tell David that this fellow disobeyed orders and killed Absalom.

III. The Death of Absalom

¹⁴Then Joab said, "I cannot linger with you." And he took three spears in his hand and thrust them through Absalom's heart, while he was *still* alive in the midst of the terebinth tree. ¹⁵And ten young men who bore Joab's armor surrounded Absalom, and struck and killed him. ¹⁶So Joab blew the trumpet, and the people returned from pursuing Israel. For Joab held back the people. ¹⁷And they took Absalom and cast him into a large pit in the woods, and laid a very large heap of stones over him. Then all Israel fled, everyone to his tent. ¹⁸Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up a pillar for himself, which *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 to this day it is called Absalom's Monument.

Joab basically tells the soldier that he doesn't have time for this nonsense. He takes three sticks, maybe symbolising the three divisions of David's army. The word translated *spears* is the Hebrew *shevatim* means "sticks," or darts in this context. Had they been spears or darts, then when an experienced killer like Joab thrust them into Absalom, he would have died right there. Instead, it seems Joab's intention is to stun Absalom, mortally wound him, maybe even torture him, and then spread responsibility for his death by ordering his ten armour-bearers to attack him at once.

Joab then sounds the ram's horn to tell everyone the pursuit is over, no more bloodshed. But they don't bury this prince with an honourable tomb. They throw him in a ditch in the forest, and heap large stones over him, a shameful burial without dignity, reserved for the worst of evildoers.

The writer contrasts this heap of stones thrown over his dead body with the stone monument he raised for himself because of being childless. Absalom had actually had children. Second Samuel 14:27 records that he'd had three sons and one daughter. He either built this monument for himself before he was even married, in some kind of self-obsession about his own legacy, or somehow all his children had died, possibly in some kind of accident.

Now that the battle is over, the last remaining detail is to how to tell the king.

¹⁹Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said, "Let me run now and take the news to the king, how the LORD has avenged him of his enemies."²⁰And Joab said to him, "You shall not take the news this day, for you shall take the news another day. But today you shall take no news, because the king's son is dead." ²¹Then Joab said to the Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have seen." So the Cushite bowed himself to Joab and ran. ²²And Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said again to Joab, "But whatever happens, please let me also run after the Cushite." So Joab said, "Why will you run, my son, since you have no news ready?"²³"But whatever happens," *he said*, "let me run." So he said to him, "Run." Then Ahimaaz ran by way of the plain, and outran the Cushite.

Ahimaaz, the son of the priest Zadok, was one of the spies who had hidden in a well and gotten the news to David. He seems zealous and desirous to take the news to David. But Joab has been in David's presence when an enthusiastic messenger arrived to announce that king Saul was dead, or that Saul's son Ishbosheth was dead. Joab remembers that David doesn't live by the saying, "Don't kill the messenger." He does, when the messenger rejoiced in the death or claims to have been part of it. So Joab tells him not to go, and instead selects a foreigner, an African actually, from Ethiopia. Joab thinks this foreigner is expendable, and sends him, but Ahimaaz insists on going.

The two of them run the several miles back to the city of Mahanaim, with Ahimaaz outrunning the Ethiopian. David's watchmen spot a runner coming. David knows that when an army has been defeated, they tend to come back in groups, retreating. A solitary runner is a messenger, bringing word about the battle. They spot another runner, and soon they realise one of the runners is Ahimaaz. David is already sentimental, and says hopefully, "He is a good man, it must be good

news”.

Ahimaaz shouts out 'Shalom!', bows down before the king and announces victory. But David is sadly not even interested in victory. He only has one question

²⁹The king said, “Is the young man Absalom safe?” Ahimaaz answered, “When Joab sent the king’s servant and *me* your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I did not know what *it was about*.”

Even Ahimaaz wasn't ready for the extremeness of David's sentimental love for his children. He wasn't expecting that question, and now doesn't know how to answer. His answer is a stumbling, incoherent nothingness. Even in the Hebrew text, it doesn't make sense. He is speaking nonsense. David eventually gets frustrated with him and tells him to stand aside so he can question the second messenger.

³⁰And the king said, “Turn aside *and* stand here.” So he turned aside and stood still.³¹Just then the Cushite came, and the Cushite said, “There is good news, my lord the king! For the LORD has avenged you this day of all those who rose against you.”³²And the king said to the Cushite, “Is the young man Absalom safe?” So the Cushite answered, “May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise against you to do harm, be like *that* young man!”

The Cushite arrives and also announces the good news of victory. And once again, all David is interested in is if Absalom is safe. The Cushite is wise enough not to answer directly, but gives the indirect and polite answer: may everyone who hates you meet the same fate as that young man.

Now witness the response of a father who knows his rebel son has died in his sin.

IV. The Despair of David

³³Then the king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept. And as he went, he said thus: “O my son Absalom—my son, my son Absalom—if only I had died in your place! O Absalom my son, my son!”

And Joab was told, “Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom.” ²So the victory that day was *turned* into mourning for all the people. For the people heard it said that day, “The king is grieved for his son.” ³And the people stole back into the city that day, as people who are ashamed steal away when they flee in battle. ⁴But the king covered his face, and the king cried out with a loud voice, “O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!”

Eight times it is recorded that David cries out the words “my son”. Here is a man so wrapped up in his children, that he cannot love the sinner and hate the sin. His son became his enemy, his son committed treason and treachery. People died defending David and fighting to get the throne back, and now all David can do is weep over Absalom's death. And now the people don't know what to feel. They thought they should rejoice because David's kingdom has been restored, but the very one they protected is now in the depths of despair and grief, inconsolably weeping over the evil son that tried to murder him. David's forces return to the city quietly, and with heads down, as if they are defeated, while David weeps.

I remind you of how David had mourned when his infant son from Bathsheba had died. There he actually stopped fasting and said, “He shall not go to me, but I shall go to him” Why doesn't David have the same attitude with Absalom? Likely because he knows that Absalom has been a wicked man, with all the signs of the unregenerate. David knows Absalom has gone into a place of outer darkness, and he will never again see him. Their parting is final, and there is no longer any repentance or salvation for Absalom. He is in despair and nearly inconsolable.

Finally, Joab takes matters in hand and addresses David as he probably never would have in any

other circumstance.

⁵Then Joab came into the house to the king, and said, "Today you have disgraced all your servants who today have saved your life, the lives of your sons and daughters, the lives of your wives and the lives of your concubines, ⁶in that you love your enemies and hate your friends. For you have declared today that you regard neither princes nor servants; for today I perceive that if Absalom had lived and all of us had died today, then it would have pleased you well. ⁷Now therefore, arise, go out and speak comfort to your servants. For I swear by the LORD, if you do not go out, not one will stay with you this night. And that will be worse for you than all the evil that has befallen you from your youth until now."

As wily and unscrupulous a man as Joab is, he is absolutely correct. David has inverted his values. His love is warped. It is inordinate affection. He loves a man who hated him, and treats with indifference those who have loved him. And Joab knows that however loyal people may be, this selfish sentimentality, this deformed and twisted love over an evil son is stretching loyalty to breaking point. If David does not wake up, rouse himself out of this mawkish grief, his people's confusion will turn to resentment, and the resentment will turn to rebellion, and the rebellion will turn to revenge.

David needed that ice-bucket over his head, and he goes out to act as a king should, to thank and comfort and congratulate his people.

⁸Then the king arose and sat in the gate. And they told all the people, saying, "There is the king, sitting in the gate." So all the people came before the king.

David comes to the place where kings should be and acts like a king.

What happened to Absalom, and how David responded gives us a lesson in how God treats pride. On the one hand, the patience and tenderness of David pictures how longsuffering God will be with our rebellion. Our pride is evil, but it is as if God has the same attitude to us, to deal gently with us, even when in our rebellion. As Psalm 103 puts it: ¹⁰He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. Even when we are treacherous, God wants to spare us.

But unlike David, God is not sentimental. He is not in love with His love, or enchanted with us so that He can never bring us to justice. His justice will never become lopsided or twisted. God's grace is never sentimental and weak. God is willing to bring His creatures to justice, when they have committed treason their whole lives.

He gives us a principle in Scripture which is like an instructional manual for all of life. God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Glory in yourself, live for self, go your own way, and one day time will run out, and you will be caught in the web of your own vanity and pride. But humble yourself, choose the true King, and defeat, eternal death and despair will never be yours. Accepting the gospel means the opposite of Absalom. You accept who is the rightful lord of life, and don't try to overthrow him, or rule your own little kingdom. You accept that whatever beauty, intelligence, gifts, abilities, they are there to be used for Him, not turned inward for your own glory. You trust in Jesus Christ, His crosswork and live in Him. When you do that, you will ironically experience what Absalom's name means. Absalom is two words "Av"= my father, "shalom" peace. My father is peace. Absalom violated his own name with pride, warring with his father. If you and I humble ourselves, accept Christ as our Saviour, we have peace with God the Father.