We're looking at the life of David, and today we're going to look at the attempted coup against David by his own son Absalom. And having spent 3 years in exile for the murder of his brother, Absalom is back in Jerusalem, but he's still banished from his father, the king's presence.

And if you're ambitious, and you want something, and you keep getting frustrated or blocked, it can begin to eat away at you, can't it. And that's what's happening to Absalom. Now, today, we can only look at the highlights, but we're going to see some of the challenges that come when life doesn't go the way we want.

Reading: 14:25-28; 14:33-15:16; 15:24-26; 15:30-34, 37; 16:20-17:8, 14, 23; 18:1, 9-15, 33.

Roots of Rebellion
Now, if someone had to describe you, what would you like them to say? Would you want them to emphasise your sweet character, or your intellect, or your appearance? Well, look at how the writer describes Absalom. Chapter 14:25: 'Now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish on him.'

So, here is a guy who makes every other man look dull. And the problem is Absalom knows it. And he's one of these guys who spends too long in front of the mirror, and when he gets his hair cut, he even has it weighed and recorded! Not that I'm jealous or anything, but why would a man do that? Probably as a sign of his potency, of his virility, or his sex appeal. I once sat in a meeting with the CEO of a large hospital and listened as he boasted about the size of his car and what that said about him. Well, for Absalom it's his hair.

But remember when David was chosen as king, what did God tell Samuel? 1 Samuel 16:7, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." But not Absalom, he's an outward appearance kind of guy, and all Israel too. And the reason is that physical attractiveness is… attractive.

And nothing's changed has it? Image and style and appearance have this way of trumping substance or character. But when Absalom looks in the mirror, what do you think is going on in his heart? I mean, he knows he's good looking, and he knows everyone else knows.

So what's going on in his heart? And the answer is, pride.

And yet, he's got reason to swagger hasn't he? I mean, he's the son of the king, and he's the good-looking son of the king. And today he'd be on Instagram as the rich kid of Jerusalem. But think about it: What part did Absalom have in any of this? What part did he have in deciding he'd be born into privilege? Or what part did he play in picking his genetic make-up that made him so hot? And the answer, nothing! These are God's gifts to him. So, far from being proud, these things should make him humble and grateful.

Ok, but do you ever catch yourself being a bit like Absalom? Sure we don't weigh our hair, but do you ever look in the mirror and think, 'looking pretty good!' and take just a bit too much pride in your appearance. Or maybe it's your intellect in comparison to others. Or your sporting abilities. And there's just this whiff of self-satisfaction. And yet, in virtually all the crucial areas which

decide success we have virtually no part to play. Our genetic make up, our families, our privileges, these are God's gifts to us. They're reasons for humble gratitude, not self-importance.

And they come with expectation. You see, Jesus said that to whom much is given, much will be expected. So, what does gifted Absalom use his gifts for? And at first sight it seems he wants to use them for others, doesn't he? To be the defender of the person who has no one else to fight for them.

You see, Absalom sets himself up at the city gate, and that was the administrative hub of government. And he begins his campaign on a platform for justice. And yet, the writer tells us just enough to see what's really driving Absalom.

Chapter 15:1, 'Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run beside him.' He gets himself an entourage, a body guard - he wants to be someone who people need to get out of the way for. Then the writer tells us he would intercept anyone coming to the king, seeking justice, and he'd say v3, "see your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you." So he twists the truth while never actually having to make any of the hard decisions that go with being king, he just leaves everyone with the impression, 'I'm on your side.'

And then he says, v4, "Oh that I were judge in the land!" In other words, think how much better things would be if I were in charge. And v5, 'Whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him.' So people would go to bow to him, but he'd stop them, and take their hand as an equal, and kiss them as a friend. Because this is Absalom, man of the people.

But in reality, was this about justice for the small person? No, this was about Absalom, and Absalom's ambition. And he's had enough of playing second fiddle to his dad. Now he wants to be king. And v6, 'Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.'

Okay, but if Absalom's pride and desire to be king were the reasons for his rise, they were also the reasons for his fall, weren't they. You see, Hushai, David's friend, returns to Jerusalem as an undercover agent, and persuades Absalom to pursue a battle plan that will favour David. And he does it by appealing to Absalom's pride, and fear of failure. As Proverbs 16:4 says, 'Pride goes before destruction.' And David and his men out-manoeuvre Absalom, and as he attempts to escape, his head gets caught in a tree and he's left hanging in mid-air, to be finished off by David's soldiers. So his magnificent hair, the thing he took so much pride in, ends up destroying him.

Over the dinner table this week we were talking about Absalom and one of my daughters said, 'we're all Absalom.' She's right isn't she? You see, if Absalom's pride and ambition were underlying his rebellion, they're what underlies so many of our own problems, aren't they? And not just our personal problems, but our resistance to God's rule in our lives. Like Absalom, we want our own way, we want our word to be the law of the land, or at least the law in our lives, or our relationships, we want to be king or queen. And that doesn't just damage our relationships with others, it leaves us alienated from God as Absalom was from David.

And yet, Absalom wasn't the only one to rebel against David. There was also Ahithophel. And Ahithophel was David's counsellor. He was like the elder statesman in the land. Everyone respected Ahithophel. He was a guy whose advice David considered, 16:23, 'as if one consulted the word of

God.' So, why would a man like that turn on David when it seems like he has nothing to gain by doing so?

And the answer is, hurt. You see, Ahithophel was Bathsheba's grandfather. And Ahithophel had watched appalled as David took and used his grand-daughter Bathsheba and arranged the murder of her husband.

So when Ahithophel advises Absalom to have sex with David's concubines, on the same roof-top from which David first saw his grand-daughter and lusted after her, Ahithophel is taking revenge out of deep personal hurt.

And hurt is dangerous, isn't it? Because when you, or someone you love, is hurt by someone else, bitterness can take root, and that can damage not just your relationship with the person who hurt you, but your relationship with God, as you dwell on the unfairness of how you've been treated.

But why do you think Ahithophel kills himself when his advice on how to take out David was rejected? Well, maybe he instinctively knows that Absalom's chosen a path that will end in defeat, that his death is already certain, so best get on with it. And yet, Ahithophel is as known for his counsel as Absalom was for his looks. And if you get your significance and worth and identity from something, and that thing is taken away from you, your life can crumble, can't it? And Ahithophel's reputation meant everything to him, and when that was gone, his reason for living was gone.

So, both Absalom, the proud, vain, ambitious politician, and Ahithophel, the seemingly wise elder-statesman were controlled by what others thought of them and how others saw them. You and I need a much better ground to stand on than that.

So, how does David respond?

Grace in Times of Trial

Now, in the reading, did you notice the way David entrusted himself to God? After his adultery with Bathsheba God said to him, through Nathan, '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 neighbour, 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.' (2 Sam 12:11-12). So David knows this is more than a family power struggle or toxic politics; this is the Lord's discipline in his life for his sin, and he humbly accepts that. And as a result he leaves Jerusalem, not in defiance, claiming, 'I've done nothing wrong', but, chapter 15:30, 'weeping as he went, barefoot and with his head covered' as a sign of penitence and mourning. And that's in huge contrast to Absalom and his chariots and mirrors.

You see, David understood that God was the ultimate king, not him, and so he puts his position, and his reputation into God's hands.

But it's also that understanding of God's sovereignty that's behind his refusal to try and manipulate God. Which is very tempting to do, isn't it?

When the American sociologist, Christian Smith, investigated the religious beliefs of American young people, he described how the majority believe that God's job is to take care of us, that he's

there to bless us and do us good. And we can get him to do that by living good lives and doing good to others. In other words, God can be manipulated for our ends.

So, you can believe that God's powerful, but that you're the one in control of your life. But you need his power to bless your life, so you need to persuade him to do that. He's the power, but you want to stay the king, the queen. But David knows better than that. He knows God is powerful *and* sovereign.

And as he flees Jerusalem, the priests come to him carrying the ark of the covenant. It's the ultimate symbol of God's power and presence. And they're offering to join David and bring that power with them.

But what does David do? He sends them and the ark back. Look at chapter 15:25, "Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favour in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and his dwelling place… Let him do to me what seems good to him." You see, David doesn't try to use God for his own ends. Position and prestige aren't David's gods. For all his faults, that's not where his identity and security lay, so he doesn't resort to 'any means possible' to cling on to them. God is David's God, and he knows he is much greater than a lucky charm to be used when life was hard - God was the sovereign king and he trusted him.

Which explains why he could put his hope in God for the future, and plan and pray for his return, even when he was under the Lord's discipline.

You see, David leaves his concubines in the palace, 15:16, 'to keep the house' - which means he hopes, even expects, to return. But he also prays. He hears Ahithophel has sided with Absalom and he prays, 15:31, "O Lord, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness."

Now, think about that. How can David commit himself to the Lord's discipline *and* plan and pray for his return? Because he knows that whilst God is just he's also merciful. Because he knows that God has promised him that his steadfast, never ending love for him will never run out.

And right after David prays against Ahithophel, who should appear at the top of the hill but Hushai, David's friend and counsellor. And Hushai is God's answer to Davids' prayer, the physical, human presence that tells David God has not abandoned him. And how often does God do that in our lives! He doesn't send some lighting bolt from the heavens, he sends us a friend, to stand with us. And it's through Hushai's advice that the Lord brings about David's rescue. As the writer says in 17:14, 'For the Lord had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel.'

So, David knew that God was sovereign, but he also knew his steadfast, undeserved love for him would never run out. I doubt Absalom knew either, and that's why their ends were so different.

And yet it's also why David's victory was so bitter sweet, because Absalom was his son. And God spares David's life, and restores him, but his family has reaped the whirlwind of his sin.

So, what about us? You see, if we're like Absalom, and our pride and wanting to be king damages our relationships and alienates us from God; and if we're like Ahithophel and we carry hurts, and our reputations and the opinion of others matters too much to us; how can we find our security and identity in God, like David did, and know his steadfast love, when we're as bad as all of them?

The One True King

Imagine a great and powerful country that had once been ruled by a king in a far-off land. But they wanted to be free of that king, and rule themselves. And so they rebelled against him and declared themselves independent of him, and at last they were free. And every year, on a special day, they celebrated their freedom and independence. What would persuade them to have that king back and rule over them again? And the answer, nothing! Unless, the king could show them that they were worse off without him, and that he was so kind, and generous and good that they would want him.

And whether or not you're American, we've all rebelled against the one true king. We've all declared our independence from God. We've all rebelled against his rule. We're all Absaloms. And we think life is better without him. We're free. So why have him back? Why listen to him and lay down your arms and welcome him as your sovereign king?

Because anything else you serve as king - whether that's your personal freedom, and you wanting to be king; whether it's your ambition, and you wanting to be someone; whether it's respect and your reputation and what others think of you, are lousy grounds on which to build your life, because when trouble comes, and relationships crumble because your wife, or husband or friend also wants to be king; or you don't get that promotion; or people don't value you like you want them to, suddenly you find you have nothing to stand on. You need a much better king, a much better god to get your significance and worth from than that.

But he can also be your king because, in Christ, you realise just how good and kind and generous a king God is. You see, here we see David suffering; betrayed by those close to him and forced into exile. But ultimately, he's responsible because of his sin. He's brought this rebellion on himself. But Christ came and suffered and was betrayed, not for his sins, but for ours. And Absalom wanted to be someone, and Ahithophel wanted a reputation, but Christ made himself nothing and of no reputation, to make you something. And Absalom cared too much for his appearance, but Christ had no external beauty and he emptied himself of all his glory to make you beautiful in his sight. And Absalom hung from a tree, speared through the heart and died for his own rebellion, but Christ was hung from a cross and was speared through heart, and died for our rebellion to make us rebels his friends. And David wished he could have died in Absalom's place, but Jesus didn't just wish it, he did it, that you might live.

And he does it all to take away our guilt, so we need never experience the punishment we deserve as rebels like Absalom, or reap the whirlwind of our sins like David, but instead know his never ending, steadfast love flowing towards us. And as we know that love, it quells our own rebellion, because our hearts are conquered by a far greater king. It gives us the ability to handle ambition, because we live for One far greater than our own name or little empire; and it enables us to handle hurt, because if God loves me like this, my life is safe in his hands.

And because it's safe, because we can trust him, and use the gifts he gives us for his glory and the good of others rather than just promoting ourselves.