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A Paralyzed Leader

Courage to Lead Series

2 Samuel 14:1-33

Pastor Bryan Clark

Okay, so you blew it. Somewhere in your story, you made a choice. Typically it's a series of disastrous choices, and you've made a mess of things. Every day you live with the painful consequences and reminders of that choice. If you could, you would do anything to go back and change it—but you can't change it. You used to live your life with a sense of mission and purpose. You were going to be part of a team that would change the world for God. Now, not so much. Now you've just kind of rolled over. You've convinced yourself that if God wants you on the team at all, it has to be the "B" team and maybe a water boy at the end of the bench of the "B" team. And for the most part, that's how you're living your life. So, what now? Well that's what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 2 Samuel, Chapter 14. The kingdom is in jeopardy; David's got a mess on his hands. David's oldest son, Amnon, was the crown prince, the heir to the throne. But now he is dead—put to death by his brother Absalom, who is now the crown prince and heir to the throne, but he's banished about ninety miles away from Jerusalem, living with his relatives on his mom's side. And David seems genuinely paralyzed and is doing nothing. Verse 1:

> **Now Joab the son of Zeruiah perceived that the king's heart *was inclined* toward Absalom. So Joab sent to Tekoa and brought a wise woman from there and said to her, "Please pretend to be a mourner, and put on mourning garments now, and do not anoint yourself with oil, but be like a woman who has been mourning for the dead many days; then go to the king and speak to him in this manner." So Joab put the words in her mouth.** (NASB, 2 Samuel 14:1-3)

So Joab now becomes a player in this chapter. Joab is genuinely concerned for the kingdom. Whatever his concerns are—maybe he sees Absalom as still being the best successor to the king. Maybe David's other sons don't measure up so well so he wants Absalom back; he wants Absalom reconciled. Perhaps he fears that Absalom could lead a rebellion from a distance and it's safer with Absalom among them. The text doesn't really tell us other than he seems genuinely concerned. In the last paragraph of chapter 13 it was difficult to tell from the language whether David was prone to pursue Absalom and put him to death or whether he was more likely to bring Absalom home and reconcile. The first paragraph of chapter 14 is equally vague. When the text says**...the king's heart was inclined toward Absalom**, the Hebrew could be translated *against* Absalom or *toward* Absalom. The word goes either way. It continues to be vague. What we know for certain is David is the king and he needs to do something. When you read through the text, it's obvious Joab has brought this to the king's attention several times but the king still seems paralyzed, unwilling to act. So Joab has a plan: He recruits a woman from a small village about ten miles south of Jerusalem, up in the hills of Judea. The text describes her as a **wise woman**. This is the same Hebrew word that was used to describe Jonadab in the previous chapter. It carries the idea of being shrewd, kind of politically savvy. Basically what he needs is a woman who has a lot of savvy to fulfill a role, in order to convince David to act.

> **Now when the woman of Tekoa spoke to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and prostrated herself and said, "Help, O king." The king said to her, "What is your trouble?" And she answered, "Truly I am a widow, for my husband is dead. Your**

maidservant had two sons, but the two of them struggled together in the field, and there was no one to separate them, so one struck the other and killed him. Now behold, the whole family has risen against your maidservant, and they say, 'Hand over the one who struck his brother, that we may put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed, and destroy the heir also.' Thus they will extinguish my coal which is left, so as to leave my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth." (Vs. 4-7)

So she appears to David as a woman in mourning. She's a widow—her husband is dead; she had two sons. The two boys were out in the field, got in a fight; one killed the other—much like a Cain and Abel story. Now the clan has risen up and they want the remaining son put to death for what he's done. Under the law, murder was a capital offense and they wanted him punished. But she says they want him put to death, but also they want to eliminate the last living heir. In other words, she's saying they have mixed motives. They want to punish him, but they also want the inheritance themselves. So if they're allowed to do this, this is the end of her husband's legacy and story. She describes it as a *burning coal*. Maybe we would say a burning ember, that it's like this glowing ember that's going out, and if David doesn't do something, it will go out forever.

Then the king said to the woman, "Go to your house, and I will give orders concerning you." The woman of Tekoa said to the king, "O my lord, the king, the iniquity is on me and my father's house, but the king and his throne are guiltless." So the king said, "Whoever speaks to you, bring him to me, and he will not touch you anymore." Then she said, "Please let the king remember the LORD your God, so *that* the avenger of blood will not continue to destroy, otherwise they will destroy my son." And he said, "As the LORD lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground." (Vs. 8-11)

So David's response is essentially, "Go home. I'll think about it," but she's very persistent. So she says again that if you pardon my son, the guilt will be on me and my family. Basically if David pardons her son, he will answer to the clan, the tribe. Murder was a capital offense; why has David pardoned her son? So that's what she's saying. The guilt won't be on David; she'll take it on herself. So David says, "Alright, if somebody messes with you, you let me know. They'll answer to the king." But she continues to be persistent. "If you don't do something, they will kill my son." So finally she gets what she's asking for. David says, "If anybody touches your son, they will answer to the king."

Then the woman said, "Please let your maidservant speak a word to my lord the king." And he said, "Speak." The woman said, "Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God? For in speaking this word the king is as one who is guilty, *in that* the king does not bring back his banished one. For we will surely die and are like water spilled on the ground which cannot be gathered up again. Yet God does not take away life, but plans ways so that the banished one will not be cast out from him. Now the reason I have come to speak this word to my lord the king is that the people have made me afraid; so your maidservant said, 'Let me now speak to the king, perhaps the king will perform the request of his maidservant. For the king will hear and deliver his maidservant from the hand of the man who would destroy both me and my son from the inheritance of God.' Then your maidservant said, 'Please let the word of my lord the king be comforting, for as the angel of God, so is my lord the king to discern good and evil. And may the LORD your God be with you.' " (Vs. 12-17)

So this is the awkward, kind of clumsy transition from this fictitious story to somehow confronting the king. Now when Nathan the prophet did this, Nathan did it skillfully—four words in English, two words in Hebrew: "You are the man," but Nathan was a prophet sent by God. This woman is an actress sent by Joab. She is on thin ice—one mistake and she's dead! So she kind of clumsily makes the transition. "King David, you are actually the guilty one. You have just made a decision that you would be willing to pardon my son for murder and you've never even met my son. Yet you as the king are unwilling to forgive the crown prince Absalom and bring him home." That's in essence what she just said. She said, "The people are hanging by a thread. If you don't do something, something bad is going to happen." David is still king. There are hundreds of thousands of people's lives that are at stake. She describes it as *water falling on the ground. The idea is once the water has been spilled, you can't get it back; it's gone forever*. "If you don't do something and do it quickly, something bad is going to happen. The people are afraid; they're waiting for you to do something." So that's the appeal she makes to the king. She offers quite a bit of flattery, "*You're like an angel of God. Certainly you'll make the right decision*." Perhaps the flattery was just a little too much.

> **Then the king answered and said to the woman, "Please do not hide anything from me that I am about to ask you." And the woman said, "Let my lord the king please speak." So the king said, "Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?" And the woman replied, "As your soul lives, my lord the king, no one can turn to the right or to the left from anything that my lord the king has spoken. Indeed, it was your servant Joab who commanded me, and it was he who put all these words in the mouth of your maidservant; in order to change the appearance of things your servant Joab has done this thing. But my lord is wise, like the wisdom of the angel of God, to know all that is in the earth."** (Vs. 18-20)

So this isn't David's first rodeo. He figures it out. "Is Joab behind this? Did he put you up to this?" She responds by saying, "You know, nothing gets past the king. You figured it out. It was Joab, but Joab is your faithful servant. He's just trying to help you think through this and make a decision, and your wisdom is like an angel of God. We're sure you'll make the right decision." David at this point is clearly backed into a corner. He has clearly publicly stated he would be willing to pardon this woman's son for murdering his brother. If David's willing to do that for someone he's never met, why would he not be willing to do that for his own son? This is the corner that Joab hoped to back David into.

> **Then the king said to Joab, "Behold now, I will surely do this thing; go therefore, bring back the young man Absalom." Joab fell on his face to the ground, prostrated himself and blessed the king; then Joab said, "Today your servant knows that I have found favor in your sight, O my lord, the king, in that the king has performed the request of his servant." So Joab arose and went to Geshur and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. However the king said, "Let him turn to his own house, and let him not see my face." So Absalom turned to his own house and did not see the king's face.** (Vs. 21-24)

David, backed into a corner, agrees to allow Joab to go get Absalom and bring him back. Joab happily does so. But David, in the meanwhile, decides that Absalom cannot see his face. It's been three years since he's seen his son; he still does not want to see him face to face. So Absalom goes directly to his house; he's not allowed to see the king's face. Jerusalem at this time was not a large place. It would have been evident to everyone. This would have been shameful; this would have been embarrassing for the crown prince. Rather than David making a decision: If he's guilty, kill

him; if he's not guilty, reconcile with him, David again chooses the path of no decision and leaves the kingdom hanging in the balance. Then the narrator makes an interesting turn in the discussion.

> **Now in all Israel was no one as handsome as Absalom, so highly praised; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no defect in him. When he cut the hair of his head (and it was at the end of every year that he cut *it,* for it was heavy on him so he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head at 200 shekels by the king's weight. To Absalom there were born three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar; she was a woman of beautiful appearance.** (Vs. 25-27)

Just about the time we're wondering what's going to happen, the narrator moves into this discussion about Absalom's appearance—tall, dark, handsome, with lots and lots of hair—I don't like him already! [*laughter*]. Such a strange description—hair that he only cuts once a year and then he is so vain that he weighs how much hair was cut off. But we're left with the question: In a Hebrew narrative it is very unusual for the writer to include physical descriptions like this. So why is this necessary and why at this point in the story? Let me suggest what I think is happening. Amnon was the oldest son, the crown prince, the successor to the king. But Amnon is presented as a spoiled brat. As a whiny, weak, spoiled, narcissistic son of the king, you get the impression nobody liked him too much and he was in no way fit to be king. So Amnon rapes his sister, and Absalom kills him. Most in the kingdom probably thought he did the king a favor, but Absalom is not like Amnon. Absalom is tall, dark and handsome. Absalom externally has the whole package of what seems like a fitting successor to the king. So when Absalom is banished, apparently none of the other sons were like Absalom, so they fear the kingdom is in jeopardy. Absalom is the one to take over the kingdom. David needs to get him home; David needs to get reconciled because Absalom needs to be the next king. That is the reason for the physical description. He had the package that was winning the hearts of the people.

But it raises an interesting question: When was the last time an apparent king was described as tall, dark, and handsome? Answer: Saul. It was a time in the life of the people when they wanted a human king—and Saul fit the package. The fact that Saul did not have a heart after God seemed irrelevant to the people. They wanted someone who looked like a king. So how could these people make the same mistake again? Answer: because there was a whole new generation who had known nothing but peace, prosperity, safety and security in the land. They had known nothing but this magnificent empire built by David and his faith in God. They did not know what life was like under Saul. They did not know what it would be like to have a king who did not have a heart after God. So it seems like they are poised to make the same bad decision again.

> **Now Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem, and did not see the king's face. Then Absalom sent for Joab, to send him to the king, but he would not come to him. So he sent again a second time, but he would not come. Therefore he said to his servants, "See, Joab's field is next to mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire." So Absalom's servants set the field on fire. Then Joab arose, came to Absalom at his house and said to him, "Why have your servants set my field on fire?" Absalom answered Joab, "Behold, I sent for you, saying, 'Come here, that I may send you to the king, to say, "Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me still to be there."' Now therefore, let me see the king's face, and if there is iniquity in me, let him put me to death." So when Joab came to the king and told him, he called for Absalom. Thus he came to the king and prostrated himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom.** (Vs. 28-33)

So for two full years Absalom is a stone's throw away, but has not seen the face of his father the king. Five full years and David has done nothing! So finally Absalom sends word for Joab to come. "I want to talk." But Joab refuses to come. Joab is now in a very difficult position, so his option is to not respond at all. So Absalom burns his field. Even in a prosperous ancient empire, this would have been a very costly thing to do. Joab is ticked, so he goes to Absalom and says, "What is the deal? Why did you burn my field?" Absalom says, "You know, I sent word to you; you're ignoring me. The only way you'd talk to me is if I burned your field down. So go to the King and give him this message. 'What am I doing here? If I'm going to be ignored by you, I might as well have stayed in Geshur. Let's get on with this thing. If I'm guilty of anything, kill me. If not, then reconcile me and let's get on with it.'" This is the first real glimpse we get of the heart of Absalom. Absalom is clearly not broken, not repentant. He clearly has no sense of what he's done to break the heart of his father and put the kingdom in jeopardy. Actually just the opposite—he's a bit of a thug. He burns Joab's field; He is defiant and rebellious. He's still unwilling to admit he's done anything wrong and he's calling the king out, "Either kill me or let's get on with it," and you get this sense of Absalom and his heart. The text ends, not by saying a father kissed his son and welcomed him back. This is not the father of the prodigal son. It is a very formal...**the king kissed Absalom**, and you get a very strong sense the story is far from over. How much anger and resentment and bitterness have built up in Absalom as he's been humiliated for two long years in Jerusalem? We'll find out next week.

But here's something to think about as we wrap this up. Here's the question of the day: What happened to David? What happened to the David that we fell in love with? What happened to the David that was a man of courage...who was a warrior...who had the faith to trust God to do unimaginable things for God's name and for God's glory? What happened to that David? Because clearly now, he is long gone. When we first fell in love with David, he was a young shepherd boy. Saul and his army were paralyzed with fear because of the challenge of Goliath, the big mouth. But David, as a young shepherd boy, heard Goliath one time and said, "I can't take this. In the name of God, give me my slingshot and I'm going to take him down." That's when we first fell in love with David. David again and again and again was portrayed as a warrior, as a man of action, as a man of courage. Over a decade in the *Wilderness School of Leadership*, learning and growing and changing, he became a man of character and integrity. He was a man after God's own heart. He became a king with courage and skill. With great faith in God and great skill as a leader, he put a fractured kingdom back together, and he built an unimaginable empire. Then he sinned. Through a series of bad choices he sinned, and even though now his sin has been forgiven, the text told us that David is not the same anymore. He seems paralyzed and unwilling or unable to act. His own son raped David's daughter—and he did nothing. His son kills his other son—and David does nothing. Now Absalom's back in Jerusalem—but for two years David has done nothing. David is still the king; David has a job to do. There are hundreds of thousands of lives hanging in the balance. He needs to get with it before it's too late.

But this is just the classic story of what happens when we blow it. We blow it; we make a mess of things; we live with the regrets and the consequences and, as a result, we just kind of roll over and quit. We no longer live with a sense of mission and purpose. We've convinced ourselves that there's no way we could still be on the team. But if God did leave me on the team, it'd be the "B" team at the end of the bench guarding the water. Most days we simply remind ourselves that we are nothing more than loser-Christian and we're just going to coast to the finish line because at one point in our lives, we blew it. It's vitally important to understand: If you're on the "B" team sitting on the bench, you're not on the "B" team because God put you on the "B" team. You're on the "B" team because you put yourself on the "B" team. God doesn't have a "B" team. God doesn't have a

water boy. God only has an "A" team and God has a long history of using messed-up leaders to change the world. God has a track record, a history of restoration and redemption—of taking those that are far from perfect and calling them to be world changers. But you have to choose to believe that and get back in the game. We have a job to do. One of the all-time greats in the *Church Hall of Fame* would have to be the Apostle Peter. But it's important to remember that the Apostle Peter was never great until after the biggest failure of his life. One can only imagine the devastation when, in the hour of truth, Peter totally blew it. The text in the gospels tells us Peter denied Jesus three times and the third time he looked up, made eye contact with Jesus, and Peter knew that Jesus knew that Peter had just denied him. I'm going to imagine till Peter went to his grave, he never got that look in Jesus' eyes out of his head. Through the trial, through the crucifixion, through the burial, even through the resurrection, it had to have been an absolute nightmare for Peter. In a moment of truth, he could not have failed more miserably. Even though Peter must have been so excited that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead, Peter knew he was off the team. In John chapter 21, we find Peter back to fishing. No question in his mind, Jesus could never trust him again! So along comes the resurrected Christ. He fixes breakfast for Peter, calls him back off the water and, in a conversation He issues Peter a recall. Peter fumbles around a little bit and Jesus finally says, "Listen, Peter. The past is past. It's done. I'm issuing you a recall. We have a world to change. We have a church to build and I want you on the team! Are you going to do it or not?" And in that moment, Peter was issued a recall—and he would go on to be a *Hall of Famer* in the history of the church.

Some of you sitting here this morning need a recall. There was a time when you lived with a sense of mission; you lived with a sense of purpose. You lived with this sense that God was going to use you to change the world. But somewhere along the way, you blew it. You made a mess of things, and ever since, you've rolled over. You have no real sense of mission; you have no real sense of purpose. You have no real sense that God could use you to be a world changer. You've just kind of rolled over and you're content to be a water boy on the bench of the "B" team for the rest of your life. Most days you just look in the mirror and see loser-Christian. You need to understand that the voices of the enemy and the voices of the culture will remind you every day of your failures...will remind you every day of your shame and your guilt...will remind you every day of all the ways you've let God down. But you've got to have the courage and the discipline to not listen to those voices, because there's another voice and it is the voice of truth and the voice of truth tells you a different story—that God is in the business of redemption and restoration...that God is in the business of using less than perfect people to change the world! And I absolutely believe if you listen this morning, what you hear is God issuing you a recall. It's time to live with a sense of mission and purpose again! It's time to get back on the team because we have a job to do! Life is too important to waste it! We have a job to do; we need you on the team. It's time to be a world changer again!

Our Father, we celebrate this morning, that You are in the business of restoring and redeeming. God, Peter's failure in the moment of truth is heartbreaking, yet the story is that you recalled him back to be one of the all-time great leaders in the Church. God, there are many here this morning, they need to listen to the voice of truth because this morning You are issuing them a recall to be a world changer. In Jesus' name.

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A Paralyzed Leader

Courage to Lead
II Samuel 14:1-33
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Opening Discussion

1. Why does it seem so hard to lead confidently after you've "blown it?" What is our natural tendency once we've failed?

2. Is failure final with God? Why or why not? Does God have a "B" team? If you feel "second rate" as a leader after a big failure, is that God's assessment or yours? What are the competing voices that call to you?

Bible Study

1. Read II Samuel 14:1-20. Review the story. What is Joab up to and why? Put yourself in Joab's shoes. What are his concerns?

2. Read II Samuel 14:21-24. Why do you think David did not allow Absalom to see his face for 2 years? Was this a good move or a bad move? Does this reflect good leadership or poor leadership? Why?

3. Read II Samuel 14:25-27. What is the description of Absalom? Why are we told this at this point in the story? Is the writer wanting the reader to compare Absalom with Saul? Why? How could the people fall for another Saul?

4. Read II Samuel 14:28-33. What do we learn about Absalom? Does he seem broken or repentant? What seems to be happening in the Kingdom because of David's passive leadership? Is David's leadership in the best interest of the people? Is it pleasing to God? Why do you believe David has become so passive?

5. Review all the ways David has been passive and seemingly unwilling to act from Chapters 13 and 14. What did his unwillingness to lead cost him? What did it cost those around him? Is David acting like a forgiven king?

Application

1. What do we learn from David's behavior as a leader after his great sin with Bathsheba and Uriah? Did anyone benefit in a good way from his lack of leadership? Is that what God wanted? Is David being humble and broken or is it something else?

2. Once you've blown it and confessed your sin and experienced God's forgiveness, what does God want from you? Is God asking you to be on the B team now? Is God impressed if we mope around like a defeated leader?

3. If failure is never final in God's economy, what does that mean for you? Is it ever too late to trust God and be a world changer?

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