

# Absalom Returns to Jerusalem

## Second Samuel 14: 21-33

**DIG:** What could David have done better with his family? Why did David refuse to see Absalom upon his return to Zion? What handsome movie star would you cast as Absalom today? Why do you think Absalom named his daughter Tamar? What kind of person would treat Joab the way Absalom did?

**REFLECT:** How can you know when to be restrained and gentle with your family and when to be tough? How does someone being physically present affect your acceptance of them? Do you have a strained relationship with someone? With a family member? What can you do to mend it? How desperate are you these days to get someone in authority to look favorably at some problem you might have?

### 980-977 BC Absalom's four-year plot against David

The scheming continued. Joab used a crafty woman from Tekoa, while Absalom hatches his own bold plan of conspiring against the king (see Do - [Absalom's Conspiracy](#)). David was convinced. He acted. He addressed Joab. He announced his decision to bring his son home. He only half acknowledged that he was giving in to Joab. In his conversation with Joab, David never alluded to the strategy of the wise woman (see DI - [The Wise Woman of Tekoa](#)). His words seem to be a grudging surrender to Joab's better wisdom. There is, however, really no joy in the text, for it is not the prodigal but the murderer who returns. And a father's kiss is not the prelude to celebration, but an ominous sign.<sup>372</sup>

**The Fetching of Absalom:** Joab, had evidently been standing in the wings to learn the outcome as the wise woman made her appeal to the king in the royal court. After being trapped by his verdict to her fictitious parable and his subsequent oath, the king relented and called for his general, saying: Very well, I will do it. Go . . . bring back the young man Absalom. By that time David knew that Joab had put the wise woman of Tekoa up to it, but instead of being angry, he gave Joab the responsibility of bringing Absalom back to Tziyon. Overjoyed, Joab fell with his face to the ground to pay him honor, and he blessed the king. Joab gushed: Today your servant knows that he has found favor in your eyes, my lord the king, because the king has granted his servant's request. Then Joab went to Geshur and brought Absalom back to Jerusalem. But the king said: He must go to his own house; he must not see my face. So Absalom went to his own house and did not see the face of the king (Second Samuel 14:21-24).

The father acted as a father wanted, against the demands of the royal office. Kings are in the business of exacting repayment, but fathers cannot live that way forever. Joab knew that, long before David acknowledged it.<sup>373</sup> The king was obviously conflicted. But the ultimate paradox was that David was indulgent when he should have exercised discipline, and now he exercises discipline when he should have been more forgiving. In any event, David's decision worked against his best interests because Absalom resented his father's limited and reserved acceptance of him and reacted with hostility.<sup>374</sup> Their relationship would just never be the same again.

**Absalom's Appearance:** The situation was not helped by the physical attractiveness of Absalom. In all Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the top of his head to the sole of his foot there was no blemish in him. This anticipates why he will attract many to revolt against David. He was totally consumed with his appearance - especially his hair. Whenever he cut the hair of his head - he used to cut his hair once a year because it became too heavy for him - he would weigh it, and its weight was two hundred Shekels (or about five pounds) by the royal standard. Ironically, it was his hair that would cause his death. Three sons and a daughter were born to Absalom. All three of his sons died young and are not named, so in Second Samuel 18:18 we are told that he built a memorial pillar because he had no surviving sons. His daughter's name was Tamar after his raped sister, and she became a beautiful woman (Second Samuel 14:25-27).

**The Failed Reconciliation of David and Absalom:** Reconciliation between father and son was slow. Painful. Costly. It could not be rushed . . . and Joab knew it. But just as reconciliation could not be rushed, it also could not be put off forever. Once again Joab was a catalyst for the necessary action by David. Joab was the only one who had a chance to move David beyond himself. Joab was the only one who had the access and the courage to speak frankly to the king. For Absalom, everything depended on Joab.<sup>375</sup>

Although his exile was over, Absalom was forced to cool his heels for two years in Jerusalem without seeing the king's face. For two years, Absalom was smoldering. What an insult! His narcissistic attitude would be fueled by his sense of outrage that he had been brought back to Yerushalayim only to be snubbed by his father, while the public adored him. Those two years gave Absalom ample opportunity to plan and scheme what he would do when he was no longer under house arrest.<sup>376</sup> Then Absalom sent for Joab in order to send him to the king, but Joab ceased to be his advocate and even refused to come to him. A shrewd man like Joab must have realized that Absalom had designs on the throne and that

the prince's growing popularity could provide him the support he needed to take over the Kingdom. Knowing how volatile the situation was, the discerning general stayed away from Absalom lest he give the impression that the egotistical prince was controlling him.<sup>377</sup>

So he sent a second time, but he refused to come. Joab's double refusal to respond to his summons was the last straw and Absalom decided to take matters into his own hands. Then he said to his servants, "Look, 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. The blazing field of barley symbolized both Absalom's rage and brought Joab scurrying home demanding an explanation. The loss of an entire crop of barley was a tragedy in ancient times (Exodus 9:28-31; Joel 1:11), even in the best of circumstances. Joab had every right to demand adequate compensation (Exodus 22:6), especially because the fire was set deliberately.<sup>378</sup>

Then Joab went to Absalom's house, and he said to him, "Why have your servants set my field on fire?" If Joab's indignant reaction was understandable, Absalom had a ready answer. He said to Joab, "Look, I sent word to you and asked you to come here so I can see the king? You left me no alternative; you are my only hope! You, after all, had been the one who brought me back. If nothing changes, it would be better for me if I were still back in Geshur! Absalom found his situation intolerable. Now then, after five years of waiting, I want to see the king's face, and if I am guilty of anything let him put me to death. Absalom may have convinced himself to think that he was merely avenging a wrong when he killed Amnon (see [Dj - Absalom Kills Amnon](#)), and that he wouldn't have had to kill his brother if his father had done his duty and passed sentence on his brother. Absalom believed that the king should exact the full penalty for killing Amnon or forgive him. He would have rather died than continue living shamefully under house arrest.

The wise woman of Tekoa had put the king in a tight spot because of Joab's scheme, but now, because of Absalom's demands, Absalom had put Joab in a similar position. After all, it was Joab that masterminded Absalom's return to Jerusalem. Joab knew that the people would never permit their favorite royal prince to be tried and convicted of a crime, but how could Joab guarantee that the king would be reconciled to his son?

The three main players, David, Joab and Absalom, in the beginning of the drama (verse 21) come together again at its end. Joab really had no choice, so went to the king and told him what Absalom had said. Then, as providence would have it, the king summoned Absalom, and he came in and as protocol demanded, bowed down with his face to the ground before the king. The king granted Absalom an audience, but the brief and formal description is telling. Though it ends with the king giving Absalom a kiss, acting according

to royal protocol and not as **his father (Second Samuel 14:28-33)**, there is no attempt made to bridge the gulf between **them**. Each saw the guilt in the other. The deadlock continued and neither had the spiritual incentive to break it. **Absalom** still had **his** hidden agenda and was determined to seize **David's** throne. Now that **the prince** was free, **he** could be visible in **the City** and enjoy the adulation of the crowds, while at the same time quietly organizing **his** sympathizers for the coming rebellion. **David** was about to lose **his** throne and crown, **his** concubines, **his** trusted adviser Ahithophel, and ultimately **his son Absalom**. It would be the darkest hour in **David's** life . . . just as **Nathan** had prophesied.<sup>379</sup>