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David, Tamar & Absalom a family in pain based on 2 Samuel 13-19

This is a rather long story intended to show the dysfunctional family portrayed in the David saga. It particularly emphasizes the problems caused by David because he gave little time or thought to being a father.

I don't think it works too well on its own, but could be useful as part of a study session focusing on family issues. Including family violence.

There was little time for wives and babies. David had his work to do. Being a king was a full-time job. And then some.

Joab his general sent word asking King David to come and help fight the Ammonites. "If you don't come and help, I'll take their city and name it after myself," which sounded to David like a bit of power politics.

David knew that Joab was not above making a run for David's job, so David did what he had always done so well. He took charge of the operation himself, beat up on the Ammonite cities in the region, took out everything of value, burned them down, killed most of the people, and came home feeling exhilarated. Very masculine. And almost totally exhausted.

Maybe that's why he made such a botch of handling the whole business with his son the Crown Prince Amnon and his daughter Tamar.

"Kids," David grumped. "What can you tell them?"

They weren't kids, of course. They were full-grown young adults with their gonads goading them into actions that were sometimes despicable.

Amnon, David's eldest son, had the hots for his half-sister Tamar. In fact, he made himself sick thinking about her. So he hatched a scheme to get her alone.

Amnon put on an elaborate show of being deathly ill. Naturally King David came to see his son when he heard he was sick. "Anything I can get for you?" he asked.

"Oh yes, father. Could you ask Tamar to come and make me some food? That would be so good."

David should have seen through the silly plot, but he was thinking of wars and politics and found it much easier to avoid contact with his many children. So he told Tamar to go fix some food for Amnon.

Which of course she did.

She had no choice. But Amnon pushed the food aside. "I can't eat with all these people around, Tamar," he whined. "Get them out of here so there's just you and me. Then I can relax and eat."

Tamar had no sooner shut the door than Amnon grabbed her. "Come on, sis! Let's do it! I can tell you really want it."

"No! Don't do it, my brother," Tamar pleaded. "Please. Don't! You'll ruin my whole life if you do this. Please!"

But Amnon was stronger than Tamar. Forcing her down on the floor, he raped her.

Tamar lay there, sobbing. Amnon stood up panting. "Get up and get out of here, slut!" he yelled.

"You're just going to use me, then throw me out?" sobbed Tamar. "Don't you realize what you have done to me? Now you're going to throw me out on the street too. What kind of an animal are you?"

"Get this nympho out of here," Amnon yelled to one of the servants. So the servant threw Tamar out and bolted the door after her.

Desperate, Tamar went to her brother Absalom. She had nowhere else to go. "Well," said Absalom, "he's your brother after all. So don't worry about it, sis. I've got a room in the back of the house you can stay in."

King David of course heard about it, and he was annoyed. But Amnon was his son, his eldest son, and, well, "boys will be boys", he said. "It's too bad about Tamar, but that's the way things go. Besides, I've got more important things on my mind."

Though Absalom had told Tamar to "forget it," he couldn't. He had Tamar there in house, walking around looking like the ruined woman that she was – knowing that the only future she might hope for – marriage and children – was now gone. It took Absalom two full years of stewing about it to get up the nerve, and then he had his servants go and kill Amnon in revenge for what he had done to Tamar.

None of which helped Tamar. Or Absalom who now became a fugitive, on the run from his father who had just lost his crown prince.

All of this had David raging around the palace at those "damn crazy kids!"— an anger that was fueled by his suppressed knowledge that he could have prevented the violent destruction of Tamar if he had acted with courage and integrity.

General Joab didn't like what was happening to David and to the politics of the palace. It was important for the welfare of the kingdom to get things back on track, to arrange some kind of reconciliation between David and Absalom. Joab wasn't all that concerned about the issues of justice involved. He just wanted political stability, and family feuds in the palace were not helpful.

Joab went to the town of Tekoa, to get the help of a woman who had a nation-wide reputation for her wisdom. Joab hired her to help solve the problem between David and Absalom.

Maybe the woman had heard how Nathan had handled the rape of Bathsheba. At any rate, she went to David and told him an elaborate story about her two sons, how they fought and one of them got killed, and so the relatives wanted revenge and that would leave her with no sons at all.

David got sucked right into the story. "Two wrongs don't make a right," David pronounced. "Revenge requires more revenge and the whole thing never stops. Tell your relatives to cool it. If they hurt that son of yours, they'll have to answer to me for it."

"Right," said the woman. "Now why don't you live by the same reasoning? Bring your son back into the palace. Two wrongs don't make a right and a third wrong even less so."

The king was silent for awhile. "It was Joab who sent you, right?"

"You're the king," said the woman. "You know everything."

Another silence. The woman of Tekoa struggled between her courage and her fear, knowing that at that moment, her life was totally in King David's hands.

"You're right. Of course you're right," said David at last.

But it never really worked out. There were hugs and kisses and tears and apologies. Absalom came back to live in Jerusalem, but the damage had been done.

David had never really been a father to his sons and even less so to his daughters, so the reconciliation could not recreate a relationship that had never existed. Everyone could see the tension whenever David and Absalom spoke to each other. Tamar was never mentioned again.

Soon Absalom was plotting to take his father's throne. He became very popular with the crowds. Among other things, he was a hunk with an absolutely glorious head of hair. And Absalom would stand around at the

city gate shaking hands, greeting people, and explaining how he would run the country so much better than his old man.

Four years later, Absalom made his move. On a visit to nearby Hebron, David's home base, Absalom declared himself king. Now the fat was in the fire.

Soon it became obvious that the weight of political power had shifted. Absalom had gained huge power, and David found himself running for his life. Running from his own son!

With thousands of people weeping along the side of the road, David and his soldiers left Jerusalem to Absalom.

Absalom may have gained the power, but David still had the smarts of a political street-fighter. He had never forgotten the tricks he'd learned in all his years of struggle to get power and to keep power. By playing hard on people's loyalties and sympathies, by planting spies and "advisors" around Absalom, and by letting everyone know that he was still God's anointed king, David managed to outflank Absalom.

It ended in one big battle in the forest of Ephraim. It was different than the other wars David had fought. "Those were honourable battles," he thought. "This is a family squabble." There would be no winners in this war, only losers.

As the troops marched by, David spoke to his generals. "Take it easy on Absalom, OK? Don't hurt him," he said to them. "After all, he is my son."

A forest is not a good place for a battle. The forest claimed more lives that day than the sword. And the battle quickly turned against Absalom. Absalom was riding through the forest, when his great head of hair got caught in an oak tree, and he found himself hanging there, unable to move. Joab heard about it, rushed over, and killed him. Then he ordered his men to take Absalom's body and throw it into a pit and pile stones over it.

That was it. With Absalom dead the battle was over. Nothing remained but to tell King David. And David reacted as if he was the loser. Which he was.

"Absalom. Oh my son, Absalom," David wailed. "I wish I had died instead of you. Oh, Absalom, my son, my son."

Joab and the generals were worried. The king was not getting any younger. He didn't seem to handle these things as well as he used to. And Joab was worried about what effect this weeping and wailing for Absalom would have on the troops.

"Pull yourself together, your majesty," said Joab. "Absalom started the war, remember? Your men fought hard for you. Some of them died for you.

They saved your life. And here you are weeping for the enemy you sent us to fight against. Don't your men mean anything to you?"

David struggled for composure. Joab was right, as usual. Focusing all his inner resources, David stuffed his grief down into his hurting soul and showed the face that was expected.

Real men have no time for grief. Real men smother their pain – smother it deep into their souls where it burns each night in the unforgiving darkness – burns until it slowly, surely turns a man into a machine.

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
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