

Who was Absalom in the Bible?

Absalom was the third son of King David, by his wife Maacah. The bulk of Absalom's story is told in 2 Samuel 13-19. He had a strong influence on his father's reign.

The first recorded event defining Absalom's life also involved his sister Tamar and half-brother Amnon. Tamar was beautiful, and Amnon lusted after her. When Tamar rebuffed Amnon's advances, he arranged, through subterfuge, to have her come to his house, where he raped her. After the rape, Amnon put Tamar out of his house in disgrace. When Absalom heard what happened, he took his sister in to live with him. For the next two years, Absalom nursed a hatred of his half-brother. Then, using some subterfuge of his own, Absalom invited Amnon to his house for a party. During the festivities, in the presence of David's other sons, Absalom had his servants kill Amnon in cold blood.

Out of fear of his father, Absalom ran away to Geshur, where he stayed for three years. During that time, Scripture says that David "longed to go out to Absalom," but we're never told that he actually did anything to reconcile the relationship. David's general, Joab, was ultimately responsible for bringing Absalom back to Jerusalem. However, even then, Absalom was not permitted to enter David's presence, but had to live in a house of his own. He lived this way, presumably never contacting or being contacted by his father, for two years. Finally, once again by way of Joab's intercession, the two men get back together, and there is a small measure of reconciliation.

Unfortunately, this peace did not last. Possibly resenting his father's hesitancy to bring him home, Absalom began to stealthily undermine David's rule. He set himself up as judge in Jerusalem and gave out promises of what he would do if he were king. After four years of this, he asked to go to Hebron, where he had secretly arranged to have himself

proclaimed king.

The conspiracy strengthened, and the number of Absalom's followers grew steadily, such that David began to fear for his own life. David gathered his servants and fled Jerusalem. However, David left behind some of his concubines and a few informers as well, including Zadok and Abiathar the priests and his adviser Hushai.

Upon entering Jerusalem as king, Absalom sought to solidify his position, first by taking over David's house and sleeping with his concubines, considered an unforgivable act. Then he laid plans to immediately pursue and attack David's forces, but the idea was abandoned owing to the advice of Hushai. This delay allowed David to muster what troops he had at Mahanaim and mount a counterattack to retake the kingdom.

David himself did not take part in the counterattack, having been persuaded by his generals to remain behind. He did give explicit instructions to the generals to "deal gently" with Absalom, in spite of his treason. Scripture makes the point that all the troops heard David's orders concerning Absalom. However, the orders were disobeyed. As Absalom was riding under some trees, his long hair became entangled in the branches, and he was unhorsed. Joab found Absalom suspended in mid-air and killed him there. Thus, the rebellion was quelled, and David returned to Jerusalem as king.

David mourned deeply over his son, so much so that it affected the morale of the army. His grief was so great that their victory seemed hollow to them, and they returned to the capital in shame rather than triumph. It was not until he was rebuked by Joab that David was restored to a measure of kingly behavior.

Much has been said about David's neglect of Absalom in this sad incident. It is possible that parental responsibility is a lesson we can take from this episode, but Scripture does not expressly teach it here. We do know that David did nothing about Amnon's rape of Tamar, although he knew about it. If David had avenged Tamar, would Absalom have taken it upon himself to mete out justice? And what was the impact on Absalom's soul of carrying hatred for Ammon for so long? We don't know the answers to those questions, but it seems that David's inaction had a deleterious effect in Absalom's life.

What we can say with certainty, however, is that pride goes before a fall (Proverbs 16:18). Absalom's self-promotion led to nothing. Also, God is sovereign. God foiled Absalom's plan to overthrow his father's kingdom (see 2 Samuel 17:14). All events are settled in eternity, and nothing, not even the Absaloms of the world, can thwart the power of God to do as He pleases in history.