



The Gift of Grace: David and Mephibosheth (2 Sam 13-14) Notes: Week Seven

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

(5) Amnon Rapes Tamar [13:1-22](#)

This narrative forges another link in the tragic chain of sin begun in chap. 11 as David's firstborn son (cf. [3:2](#)) and heir-apparent committed an incestuous rape. The parallels between the king's sin and that of his son Amnon are numerous: both committed immoral acts outside of marriage with beautiful women (v. [1](#); [11:2](#)) in the privacy of their own residences (v. [7](#); [11:4](#)). Both women experienced great grief (v. [19](#); [11:26](#)) because of the men's actions. Ultimately, both transgressions brought about death for sons of David (v. [29](#); [12:18](#)). This carefully constructed narrative seems intended to demonstrate at least two truths: first, that God's prophetic word is true; second, that the sins of one generation imprint the next generation. Each sin not only fosters more sin, it also fashions it by providing precedents for others to follow.

[13:1-2](#) Following David's successful completion of the Ammonite campaign, "Amnon" (v. [1](#)), the firstborn son "of David, fell in love with Tamar," his "beautiful" half-sister born to David's wife Maacah (cf. [3:3](#)). Unfortunately for Amnon, she was also the "sister of Absalom," David's third son.

Though Amnon was fascinated by Tamar's feminine charms, he was also "frustrated to the point of illness" (v. [2](#)) with her. The stated reason for Amnon's frustration placards his own lack of character and parades Tamar's virtue: he was upset because "she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible for him to do anything to her." Tamar was implicitly portrayed as a woman of the Torah, for the Law required that unmarried women retain their virginity (cf. [Deut 22:13-21](#)).

In his readiness to compromise Tamar's virtue, however, Amnon was implicitly pagan. To emphasize the point, the biblical narrator deliberately patterns the portrayal of Amnon's actions and emotions after Shechem, an immoral Canaanite in the Torah. Shechem, like Amnon, was the firstborn son of a ruler who also raped the daughter of an Israelite leader and ended up dead (cf. [Gen 34:2-3, 26](#)). Amnon is portrayed as one who chose the way of the Canaanite; thus, readers are prepared to accept the fact that he will suffer the fate of the Canaanite.

[13:3-5](#) Encouraging Amnon in his sinful desires was "Jonadab son of Shimeah" (v. [3](#)), his "companion" (NIV, "friend") and cousin. Jonadab was described as "a very wise [NIV, "shrewd"] man"; he was the only person in Scripture accorded this ostensibly complimentary description. The word translated in the NIV as "shrewd" is *hākām*, the term normally rendered in the positive sense as "wise." Yet, as events

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 377-394.

would soon demonstrate, Jonadab's wisdom was "earthly, unspiritual, of the devil" ([Jas 3:15](#); cf. also [Jer 4:22](#); [1 Cor 2:6](#)).

Jonadab was concerned that his cousin was looking "haggard morning after morning" (v. [4](#)), and spoke with him about it. He soon discovered that Amnon's problem was that he was "in love with Tamar," his "brother Absalom's sister." The narrator's restatement that Tamar was closely related to Amnon (cf. v. [1](#))—too close to permit a sanctioned sexual relationship (cf. [Lev 18:11](#); [20:17](#); [Deut 27:22](#))—emphasizes the fact that Amnon was contemplating an act strictly prohibited by the Torah. Amnon's so-called "love" was as perverse as Jonadab's so-called "wisdom"; it was a sensual craving for sexual gratification that was just as earthly, unspiritual, and devilish as Jonadab's wisdom.

Jonadab suggested a churlish plan for Amnon that was both simple and surefire: the king's son would "go to bed and pretend to be ill" (v. [5](#)). Then when David visited his son, Amnon would petition the king to order Tamar to spend an extended amount of time in the privacy of Amnon's residence, satisfying the physical appetite of her half-brother. At an appropriate moment during Tamar's nurturing encounter with Amnon, he would compel her to satisfy his sexual appetite as well.

[13:6–7](#) The plan's initial phase worked perfectly. David, being the good father that he was, heard the report of his son's illness and postponed administrative matters long enough to visit the heir-apparent in his own residence. Apparently, each of the older royal sons was granted the privilege of having his own residence in the City of David (cf. vv. [7–8](#)).

Amnon requested, and David agreed, that Tamar should "come and make some special bread"—perhaps in the courtyard oven of Amnon's residence—and that she feed it to Amnon herself. The "special bread" (Hb. *lēbibā*) was apparently a heart-shaped cake or dumpling, perhaps made of a dough laced with healing herbs.

[13:8–11](#) As a proper daughter, Tamar obeyed her father's orders. When she arrived at Amnon's residence, dutifully she made the bread. However, "he refused to eat." Instead, he evicted everyone from the premises—everyone, that is, except Tamar.

When the two of them were alone in the privacy of his residence, Amnon ordered his half-sister to bring him the food and feed it to him in his bedroom. Instead of taking Tamar's food, however, Amnon "grabbed her" and begged his half-sister to lie with him.

[13:12–13](#) Tamar resisted, both verbally and physically. Her first word in response to her half-brother's sinful request was "No" (v. [12](#); NIV, "Don't"). In fact, Tamar included a form of the word *no* in the first four consecutive clauses of her response to Amnon. She directly ordered him not to "rape" (a form of *ānā*; NIV, "force") her. Then she appealed to his conscience, reminding him that what he was pursuing was "a wicked thing" that "should not be done in Israel."

Tamar's use of the phrase "should not be done" and of the term "wicked thing" (Hb. *nēbālā*; cf. [1 Sam 25:25](#), "folly") are an unmistakable allusion to the Torah's account of Shechem's rape of Dinah (cf. [Gen 34:7](#)). This skillful reference to a sordid chapter in patriarchal history not only forced Amnon to put his mind—at least momentarily—back into the sacred Scriptures, but also to consider the end result of Shechem's—and therefore, his own—actions.

Tamar also compelled Amnon to think about the lasting impact of his actions on both of their lives. Amnon's theft of her virginity would place on her a personal "disgrace" (v. [13](#)) that she would never be able to "get rid of." It would ruin Amnon's reputation as well, causing him to be thought of as "one of the 'Nabals' [NIV, 'wicked fools'] in Israel"—perhaps a not-so-subtle allusion to another wicked man who died under the Lord's curse for having mistreated others ([1 Sam 25](#)).

Finally, Tamar urged Amnon to delay—not permanently forgo—his sexual gratification. If sexual intimacy with Tamar was his objective, she asserted that he might still have it. In fact, it could be his without the taint of disgrace or ruined reputation if he would first “speak to the king” and obtain permission to marry her.

[13:14–16](#) Unfortunately, Amnon was beyond being influenced by moral, religious, or rational considerations. Instead, he attacked Tamar. His sensual objective having been achieved with Tamar and his physical passions now spent, Amnon now “hated her with intense hatred” (v. [14](#)). The winds of “love” (v. [1](#)) which had propelled him so forcefully proved to be nothing more than gusts of lust. Feelings of guilt and shame heightened Amnon’s emotions, so that he now “hated her more than he had loved her” (v. [15](#)).

The Torah dictated that a man who had sexual intercourse with a virgin not pledged to be married to another was obligated to marry her and pay a financial penalty (cf. [Exod 22:16–17](#); [Deut 22:28–29](#)). However, when Amnon ordered Tamar to “get up and get out” of his house, his actions following the rape indicated he did not intend to follow the Torah in this matter. Tamar, knowing that this kind of disregard for the Law only made the situation worse, pointed out that “sending” her “away would be a greater wrong than what you have already done to me” (v. [16](#)). However, the morally reckless Amnon once again “refused to listen to her.”

[13:17–19](#) To hasten Tamar’s eviction, Amnon “called his personal servant” (v. [17](#)) and ordered him to “expel this one [NIV, “woman”], then bolt the door after her.”

In keeping with the Torah’s implicit expectation that fathers assume some responsibility in preserving their daughters’ virginity until marriage (cf. [Deut 22:13–21](#)), David encouraged and rewarded his virgin daughters’ sexual purity by providing each of them with a status-laden “richly ornamented robe” (*Hb. kētonet pāssîm*; cf. [Gen 37:3](#)). By maintaining their virginal status till marriage, the daughters preserved their chances of achieving the most favorable marital circumstances. Depending on the circumstances leading to their deflowering, daughters who prematurely lost their virginity might even lose their lives (cf. [Deut 22:21](#)).

Tamar had been wearing the distinctive dress of a royal virgin daughter when she was raped, but afterwards “she tore the ornamented robe” (v. [19](#)), and overwhelmed by shock and grief, she “put her hand on her head ... weeping” as she returned to her residence (cf. [Jer 2:37](#)).

[13:20–22](#) Not long afterward, Tamar’s “brother Absalom” spoke with her regarding the sordid experience in Amnon’s residence. She confirmed that “Amnon” had been “with” her, humiliated her, and then abandoned her. Amnon’s criminal activity condemned Tamar to live the life of “a desolate woman” because she was now disqualified from active consideration for any royal marriage contracts. Nevertheless, Absalom attempted to provide her with some comfort and consolation. He could neither give Tamar a husband nor be one to her, but he did provide her with two of the amenities associated with marriage—a place to live and the attendant promise of protection. He also counseled her not to “take this thing to heart,” that is, to let the memory/ implications of the tragic event continue to dominate her thinking.

For his part, King David “was furious” (v. [21](#)). The outrageous misconduct by his heir-apparent was both a shame and an embarrassment to the royal family. Nevertheless, there was little that the king could do in response to the situation. The only penalty prescribed in the Torah for Amnon was the payment of fifty shekels of silver ([Deut 22:29](#)), an insignificant sum for the king’s son. While David could have also forced Amnon to marry Tamar (cf. [Exod 22:16](#); [Deut 22:29](#)), doing so would have created an emotionally explosive situation that only multiplied the family’s heartache: besides, the Torah prohibited marriage between near kinsmen (cf. [Lev 18:11](#); [20:17](#); [Deut 27:22](#)). Thus David found

himself in a posture of weakness in the matter. His situation had become uncomfortably similar to that of Eli, who also had to deal with errant offspring (cf. [1 Sam 2:22–25](#)).

Meanwhile, Absalom, who had cast himself as something of a kinsman-redeemer (a *gō'ēl*) in this matter, “hated Amnon because he had disgraced his sister Tamar (v. [22](#)). Shrewdly, however, he “never said a word to Amnon, either good or bad.” Absalom’s rage would be expressed more cogently in due time.

(6) Absalom Murders Amnon, Then Flees to Geshur [13:23–39](#)

[13:23](#) The day of reckoning came “two years later.” In connection with the sheepshearing and celebration (cf. [1 Sam 25:7–8](#)) at the location some fourteen miles north of Jerusalem, Absalom “invited all the king’s sons to come there.”

[13:24–27](#) Absalom himself had remained in Jerusalem, while his servants performed the laborious task of shearing the sheep. During those days, Absalom advanced his plot to avenge Amnon. The scheme began innocently enough, as Absalom requested that “the king and his officials please join” him at Baal Hazor for a time of celebration. Absalom’s request was a calculated one, since David’s acceptance of the offer would have ended his chances of killing Amnon during the event.

However, the gamble paid off as David graciously declined Absalom’s petition. Even though Absalom “urged him, he still refused to go, but gave him his blessing” (v. [25](#)). By this Absalom succeeded in manipulating his father into a defensive position of social obligation that almost forced David to say yes to Absalom’s next request. The request came without delay and with the appearance of innocence: if the king himself would not come, then let him send “my brother Amnon” (v. [26](#)), the king’s heir-apparent in his place.

David, the ever-astute interpreter of human motivation (cf. [1 Sam 20:1–3](#)), immediately was suspicious of Absalom’s request and asked him “why” Amnon “should go” as the guest of honor. Absalom artfully rebuffed the king’s attempts to probe the true motive by merely repeating the request. Thus for the second time—and both of them following his sin with Bathsheba—David is portrayed as having been deceived (cf. [12:1–7](#)). Thus, David “sent with him Amnon and the rest of the king’s sons” (v. [27](#)).

[13:28–29](#) In these verses the narrative setting has changed from Jerusalem to the site of a banquet at Baal Hazor, but the biblical writer omits any mention of the change so as to quicken the pace of the story at this key point. During this time of lively celebration, Absalom quietly set his treacherous plan in motion. The narrator’s mention of the circumstances of sheepshearing, a banquet and its attendant revelry link this passage with [1 Samuel 25](#) and prepare the reader for the untimely death of a “Nabal” (= “wicked fool”).

Absalom’s servants apparently balked at the order to commit murder. After all, they knew what David had done to other men who had killed royalty (cf. [1:15–16](#); [4:9–12](#)), and they probably feared he would do the same to them. Absalom encouraged them not to “be afraid,” however; he himself would take responsibility for the murder, since it was he who had “given ... this order.”

With that assurance, “Absalom’s men did to Amnon what Absalom had ordered” (v. [29](#)). The revenge must have seemed doubly sweet to Absalom, for he had succeeded in using the very same tactics to destroy Amnon that Amnon had previously used to destroy Tamar. Like Amnon, he had deceptively manipulated the king into ordering one of his children into a trap; then in the midst of a meal he had overpowered the sibling and carried out a violent and wicked fantasy at their expense.

As soon as the attack on Amnon was carried out, David's other sons fled on their mules, the preferred mount for royalty at that time (cf. [18:9](#); [1 Kgs 1:33, 38, 44](#)). Their flight from Absalom was quite disorganized and must have taken them in different directions, as is evidenced by the fact that David could not dismiss or correct the erroneous initial account of the attack for some time.

[13:30–31](#) The initial report King David received of the tragic incident was woefully inaccurate. David was told that “all of the king’s sons” (v. [30](#)) had died at the hands of Absalom, and that “not one of them is left.” The king’s first reaction to this horrifying report was to leave his royal throne; then he “tore his clothes and lay down on the ground” in a classic expression of grief and distress (cf. [Josh 7:6](#); [2 Sam 12:16](#)). Nathan’s words regarding a sword of judgment that would not depart from his house (cf. [12:10](#)) must have come flooding back to him at this time. “All” (v. [31](#)) of David’s servants also “stood by with their clothes torn”—no doubt they, too, felt shock and anguish at the reported murder of the royal heirs.

[13:32–33](#) The first indication that the first report was faulty came from David’s nephew “Jonadab son of Shimeah” (v. [32](#)), who had apparently been in the royal palace at the time of the dispatch. As Amnon’s good friend and as a cousin to both Amnon and Absalom, Jonadab was aware of the extreme tension that existed between David’s two sons. He knew that “Absalom’s expressed intention ever since the day Amnon raped his sister Tamar” was to kill his half-brother. Confidently, therefore, he asserted that “only Amnon is dead” (v. [33](#)), and that the king should dismiss “the report that all the king’s sons are dead.”

[13:34–36](#) The first evidence that Jonadab’s words were reliable came as one of David’s watchmen saw a group coming down the hill into Jerusalem. The fact that the group was approaching Jerusalem from the west even though Baal Hazor was northeast of the royal city suggests that they had taken a circuitous return route and helps to explain why the report came to David much sooner than his sons did. The **LXX**, whose reading is followed by the NIV, inserts a clause that mentions “Horonaim,” a twin site northwest of Jerusalem known elsewhere as Upper- and Lower Beth Horon. As the group continued its trek, it became possible to discern the individual’s identities. As soon as Jonadab visually confirmed his previous assertion, he announced that “the king’s sons are here” (v. [35](#)).

With the exception of Absalom, who “had fled” (v. [34](#)), the king’s surviving sons entered grief stricken (v. [36](#)). This unrestrained emotional outburst from those who had witnessed the killing served to intensify the emotions of the royal court. The “king, too, and all his servants” erupted in tears and “wept very bitterly.”

[13:37–39](#) Absalom, like his brothers, had also fled to a king. However, it was not to his father, but rather his grandfather (cf. [3:3](#); [1 Chr 3:2](#)), “Talmi son of Ammihud, the king of Geshur” (v. [37](#)) that Absalom went. Thus, the one who was apparently next in line to become Israel’s king, was living in exile in a region immediately east of the Sea of Galilee, some eighty miles northeast of Jerusalem.

David understandably remained in a state of grief over the death of his oldest son for quite some time. During David’s three-year period of grief, Absalom lived in exile at Geshur. In fleeing Israel as a young man to avoid the wrath of a sitting king, Absalom’s life paralleled that of his father: a younger David had once been forced to live as a refugee in non-Israelite territory to elude King Saul. David knew the pain and anxiety that resulted from separation from one’s family and homeland, and perhaps it was the remembrance of those emotions that made “the spirit of the king” (v. [39](#)) yearn “to go to Absalom.” In addition, David had finally forgiven Absalom for killing his brother and was ready to be reconciled to the son who apparently stood next in line to become Israel’s king.

(7) David is Reconciled with Absalom [14:1–33](#)

[14:1–3](#) “Joab son of Zeruiah” (v. [1](#)), David’s nephew and the commanding general of Israelite forces, had walked with his uncle through the deepest valleys of life and climbed with him to the heights of power in Israel. Because of his lifelong association with David, he knew how David thought; and in the present situation Joab knew that “the king’s heart was upon [NIV, “longed for”] Absalom.”

In an effort to help David and bring healing to the wounded family, Joab devised a plan. Though devious, the scheme was noble in purpose and not unprincipled in its implementation. Joab’s strategy was essentially the same as that used successfully by Nathan (cf. [12:1–14](#)): someone would obtain an audience with the king, seek judgment in a fictitious situation, let the king pronounce judgment, then compel the king to apply the judgment to himself. Joab’s hope was that David would have the good sense to implement in his own life the wise advice he had given others.

Accordingly, Joab enlisted the services of a woman from Tekoa (v. [2](#)) to play a role requiring consummate dramatic skill. Costumed as one in mourning, the Tekoite was to act as “a woman who has spent many days grieving for the dead.” She was to come before King David to seek an authoritative judgment and in the process deliver in a convincing way a speech Joab had given to her.

In choosing this method of seeking to influence David, Joab implicitly acknowledged the power of human art—in this case the dramatic arts—for shaping the lives of people and so transforming human society. Artistic expression can move the heart of even a seemingly invincible oriental monarch.

[14:4–7](#) The unnamed heroine accepted the assignment. As the king sat in the palace in Jerusalem performing the task of administering justice among the Lord’s people, the woman appeared before him with appropriate humility and then pleaded for “help.”

David responded favorably to her appeal and provided her with an opportunity to present her situation. She then began to present a *māšāl* teaching story daringly told in the first person. In her dramatic performance of Joab’s script, the woman presented herself as an Israelite “widow” (v. [5](#)).

The plot of her story bears a remarkable similarity to the Torah’s account of the first murder in human history (cf. [Gen 4:8–16](#)). As in the story of Cain and Abel, the present murder occurred as two brothers were alone “in the field” (v. [6](#)). One brother killed the other, and after the murder occurred concerns were expressed that the killer might die at the hands of others. In both cases an appeal was made to an authority figure to save the killer’s life. The parallels suggest that Joab deliberately crafted the tale in order to compel David to render the same verdict that the Lord issued in Cain’s behalf.

Parallels between Joab’s Tale and Gen [4:1–15](#)

	Cain and Abel	Joab’s Tale
Two brothers	Gen 4:1	v. 6
alone together in a field	Gen 4:8	v. 6
one killed the other	Gen 4:8	v. 6
concerns expressed about murderer being killed by others	Gen 4:14	v. 7
authority figure intervened to save murderer’s life	Gen 4:15	v. 8
threat of retaliation for anyone contravening authority’s decision	Gen 4:15	v. 10

Implicit in Joab’s use of this parallel is the assumption that David had a masterful knowledge of the Torah, and that Joab—like Nathan before him (cf. [12:6](#))—counted on the king using it as an authoritative guide in formulating his legal decisions.

[14:8–11](#) Just as Joab had hoped, David ruled that the son’s life was to be spared. The king’s decision to spare the murderer’s life was not based on legal mandates in the Torah, for its explicit commands required the son’s death (cf. [Gen 9:6](#); [Exod 21:12](#); [Lev 24:17](#)). Rather, the king’s decision was based on a narrative account within the Torah. The narrative account of the Lord’s merciful intervention in Cain’s behalf—in spite of legal guidelines to the contrary set forth by the Lord himself—provided an enlightening insight into the Lord’s own application of covenantal law. Yahweh the Merciful (cf. [Exod 34:5–7](#))—he who had spared both Cain and David (cf. [12:13](#)) from Torah-mandated death sentences—had established the definitive precedent for David’s commutation of the murderer’s sentence. David was doubly justified in choosing to spare the son, because killing him would snuff out “the only burning coal” (v. [7](#)) the woman had left, and leave her “husband neither name nor descendant on the face of the earth.”

Accordingly, David assured the woman that he would “issue an order” (v. [8](#)) in her behalf granting a reprieve for her son. The woman apparently expressed concerns that the king’s disregard for the letter of the Law might not “let the king and his throne” (v. [9](#)) be perceived as being “without guilt.” After all, the Torah permitted an “avenger of blood” (v. [11](#)) to track down and kill a murderer (cf. [Num 35:12](#), [19–21](#)).

However, David assured her the matter would stand as he had decided it. Using an oath that ominously foreshadows the fate of Absalom (cf. [18:9](#)), he swore that “not one hair of your son’s head will fall to the ground.” The king added forebodingly that any who challenged his decision “will not bother you again” (v. [10](#)).

[14:12–17](#) David had settled the legal dispute to his own satisfaction and expected the woman to depart (cf. v. [8](#)). However, the woman violated courtly protocol by requesting to “speak a word to my lord the king” (v. [12](#)). In spite of her disregard for the norms, however, David graciously permitted her to “speak.”

In the lengthy (ninety-three words in the **MT**) speech that followed, the woman of Tekoa revealed the central thesis of her presentation before David. By failing to restore Absalom to the court of Jerusalem, David was acting “against” the interests of “the people of God”—for if, as it appears from the text, Absalom was the heir-apparent to the throne, then keeping Absalom in exile threatened the fledgling dynasty of David, and thus a continuation of quality leadership for Israel.

Speaking as a sage of Israel, the wise woman of Tekoa then juxtaposed two profound truths about life. First, she noted that death is a hallmark of the human condition. Her emphatic verbal statement that “we must surely die” (v. [15](#)) is an apparent allusion to [Gen 2:17](#); if that is the case, then she is restating the Torah teaching that God consigned all people to die. Second, she noted that although God requires every person’s death, he does not try to “take away life; instead, he devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him” (v. [14](#)). This irony—that God established a world system that requires death, but then works to contravene his own system by creating ways to spare life—provided David with a theological justification for becoming reconciled to Absalom. Since the Lord makes harsh judgments against sinners but then establishes mechanisms for reconciliation, the king—as the Lord’s representative in matters of justice on earth—should do the same.

The woman confessed that her presentation to the king came from a heart filled with both fear and hope: “the people” (v. [15](#)) had made her “afraid”— perhaps because of their pessimism regarding her chances for success in gaining a commuted sentence for her (fictitious) son. But David had given her hope that he might “do what his servant asks,” and would “agree to deliver his servant from the hand of the man who is trying to cut off both” her and her (fictitious) son from “the inheritance God gave” them (v. [16](#)).

The wise woman concluded her central monologue with a plea, a statement of profound faith in David’s wisdom, and a blessing for the king. Her plea was that David’s judgment in her imaginary dilemma would “bring” her “rest” (v. [17](#)). Her favorable comparison of David with “an angel of God in discerning good and evil” expressed confidence that the king would act as wisely as the Lord would—and did in the past—in the matter. The wise woman’s blessing of David stands as the only example of a female pronouncing a blessing on a king in the Hebrew Bible.

[14:18–20](#) The woman’s not-so-subtle linkage of her tragic story with David’s own personal tragedy convinced the king that she was acting in collaboration with a member of the royal family. Accordingly, he demanded that she reveal whether or not it was Joab. Knowing that to “turn to the right or to the left” in her answer could prove fatal, she confessed that it was David’s “servant Joab who instructed” her “to do this and who put all these words into” her mouth. Though it was true that Joab had arranged the woman’s performance and plea, his guiding purpose in it was simply “to change”—and improve— “the present situation” (v. [20](#)).

[14:21–22](#) Joab carried out his scheme in part to help David find an adequate justification for doing what his heart had been urging him to do (cf. [13:39](#)). With Joab’s help David had come to realize that reconciliation with his son was both consistent with the Torah and in the nation’s best interests; thus, he agreed to “do it” (v. [21](#)). Without delay, he ordered Joab to “bring back the young man Absalom.”

Joab had risked both his position of honor in David’s court, and perhaps even his own life in attempting to influence the king as he did. No doubt relieved that his gamble had paid off, Joab fell on his face before David. David had “granted his servant’s request,” to be sure; but in the process David had also satisfied his own yearnings. The healing process between father and son could now move to a new, albeit difficult, phase.

[14:23–24](#) In accordance with the royal decree, Joab went to Geshur and brought Absalom back to Jerusalem” (v. [24](#)). Absalom was permitted to return “to his own house” (v. [25](#)) and possessions within the confines of the royal city. However, he was not permitted to “see the face of the king,” in accordance with an edict issued by this father.

Why did David refuse to see his son Absalom after permitting him to return to Jerusalem? Perhaps a major reason was David’s desire to imitate the Lord’s example in dealing with Cain. Though the Lord spared Cain’s life, Cain “went out from the face of the Lord” ([Gen 4:16](#); NIV, “presence of the LORD”), and apparently was never again in the presence of the Lord. Since David had previously relied on the Cain narrative to guide his judgment in this matter (cf. comments on vv. [5–11](#)), it was consistent for him to bar Absalom from his face as well.

The practical effect of David’s action was highly negative for Absalom. His expulsion from the royal court undoubtedly meant that he—notwithstanding his position as the heir-apparent—had lost any claim to Israel’s throne. By murdering his brother, Absalom had effectively removed himself from the chain of royal succession, even as Cain had removed himself from the line of blessing through a similar act.

[14:25–27](#) Though Absalom had fallen out of favor with David, he was a popular figure among the other Israelites. One reason for his popularity was his physical appearance.

The biblical narrator’s effort to describe Absalom’s physical attractiveness is extraordinary and serves a thematic purpose. Previously the theologically oriented narrator has taught that people are not to look at outward appearance; instead they are to imitate the Lord by looking at “the heart” (cf. [1 Sam 16:7](#)). Absalom’s physical appeal assured that those untrained in godliness would be beguiled by him. In so doing, however, they would blind themselves to the Lord’s ways and will. The narrator’s emphasis on Absalom’s appearance subtly warned of impending tragedy, both for Absalom and his followers.

In addition to being handsome, Absalom was a hairy man. In fact, when Absalom would “cut his hair from time to time” (v. [26](#)) “its weight was two hundred shekels by the royal standard” (lit., “the stone of the king”)—slightly more than five pounds, assuming the weight of a shekel to be 11.5 grams. To many of the Israelites of Absalom’s day this must have served as evidence of virility. However, the narrator’s mention of this aspect of Absalom’s appearance implicitly draws an unflattering parallel with Esau (cf. [Gen 25:25](#)). Like Esau (cf. [Gen 25:28](#)), Absalom was a masculine, hairy son who was favored by his father; like Esau (cf. [Gen 25:29–34](#)), Absalom sacrificed his birthright through foolish actions at a meal, and ultimately caused much grief for his father (cf. [Gen 28:8](#)). Certainly the writer’s emphasis on Absalom’s hair would also have called to mind the tragic story of Samson.

The narrator criticizes Absalom subtly by clarifying the reason for his haircut; he would cut his hair “when it became too heavy for him.” The Torah provided two primary reasons for a man to cut his hair: one was to give the hair to God following the successful completion of a Nazirite vow (cf. [Num 6:18](#)), and the other was to enter into a state of ceremonial cleanness before the Lord (cf. [Lev 14:8–9](#); [Num 8:7](#)). Absalom’s stated motive for getting a haircut was totally devoid of any connection with service to Yahweh; it was secular and self-serving. This detachment of Absalom’s act from any religious motivation underscores the profane nature of the man’s life and reinforces the intimation that his life would end disastrously. Interestingly, his hair would play a significant role in that disastrous end (cf. [18:9](#)).

A genealogical note in the text states that Absalom fathered “three sons and a daughter” (v. [27](#)). This note, likewise, plays an important role in helping the reader evaluate Absalom’s life. Although three sons would have been reckoned as a great blessing, by the time of Absalom’s death all of them would be dead, so that Absalom had no male heir to continue his family line ([18:18](#)). The Torah declared that disobedience to the Lord would cause one’s children to be cursed ([Deut 28:18](#)), and the narrator’s indication that Absalom lost all three male heirs so early in life would reinforce the notion that he was indeed under the Lord’s curse.

Absalom chose the name “Tamar” (lit., “Palm tree”) for his “beautiful” daughter, apparently as a gesture of sympathy for his desolate and humiliated sister who resided with him in his residence ([13:20](#)). While this act might have been viewed as thoughtful and affirming by many, it had the effect of perpetuating painful memories in David’s household for another generation. Every time Absalom thought or spoke his daughter’s name he created another opportunity to relive the tragic chain of events that resulted in the five-year alienation from David, and so to increase the bitterness he held toward his father.

[14:28–30](#) In effect Absalom was living in internal exile; he was restored to his former abode in the most important city in Israel, but he was restricted in his ability to move about. Not only did this situation affect Absalom in the present in that it prevented him from dining at the royal table, but it also affected his future in that he could not be considered as David’s successor to the throne.

After tolerating two years of quiet frustration in internal exile, Absalom decided to bring it to an end by implementing a plan to restore fellowship with his father David. Since he could not approach David directly, he “sent for Joab in order to send him to the king” (v. [29](#)). However, Joab repeatedly “refused to come.”

Absalom was undaunted in his efforts to achieve the goal of being restored to his father. Ever the man of bold action, he established a plan designed to compel Joab to come to him: the king’s son ordered “his servants” (v. [30](#)), to go to “Joab’s field” of barley and “set the field on fire.” According to the Torah, Absalom would have to reimburse Joab for the lost harvest (cf. [Exod 22:6](#)), but Joab would have to come to him before he could get it. In doing a cost-versus-benefits analysis of the situation, Absalom concluded the price he would pay was worth the reconciliation it might bring about.

[14:31–33](#) Absalom’s plan to force a meeting with Joab worked. In the confrontation that followed, Absalom expressed his frustrations regarding the present limiting circumstances. He noted that life would be less oppressive for him in his grandfather’s household in “Geshur” (v. [32](#)) than it was in his father’s royal city as things now stood.

But Absalom was in something of a dilemma: he did not want to depart from Israel, nor did he wish to live any longer in internal exile. Either he would experience a complete restoration of his former status in the royal household or he would die. And if Absalom had his way, it would be his father David who would decide his fate.

Having been confronted with Absalom’s audacious demand, Joab dutifully “went to the king and told him” (v. [33](#)) of Absalom’s ultimatum. Absalom’s power play worked—after five years of separation, “the king summoned Absalom” to come before him. With all the humility of a lowly slave, David’s son “came in” to the king’s presence “and bowed down with his face to the ground.” However, David did not treat Absalom as a slave but as an equal: “the king kissed Absalom.” This act demonstrated both David’s respect and acceptance of his son. Reconciliation had occurred. David had regained his son, and Absalom had regained his father.