I am calling your attention to two texts. The first is one of the most tragic utterances of the Bible. It is one of the most tragic to be found in the literature of the world. "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" The second is the opposite. It is rich in high loyalty. It tells of one who is contributing his best, of one who is making a sowing that is full of the rich prophecies of a glorious harvest. "Master, I have brought unto thee my son."

I.

The men who uttered these words have much in common.

1. They are both fathers. In that distant day they occupied positions of honor. Some of you are perhaps old enough to remember when a father was spoken of as head of the family. Of course that high title is no more. The modern seems either to have abdicated as did Edward VIII or to have been uncrowned like the king of Norway. From a position of honor he has come to one of second rate honor or of none at all.

I have reminded you before how strikingly this was brought home to me years ago. On Mother's Day we had a rich and mellow service honoring mother.
We were all very tender and sentimental and emotional. Some went home saying gladly, "I had a good cry." Nor am I averse to tears. It often helps us to weep. Sometimes it purges something mean out of us. Having enjoyed this weepy services I decided when Father’s Day came around that another would be in order. But alas, and alas, it was as dry as the Sahara. I have never been able fully to understand why mothers name should be always a signal for handkerchiefs while fathers is a signal for howls. But that is what seems to be the case. But both these men were fathers at a time when fathers really counted.

2. They were both men of deep devotion to their sons. Why this heart-breaking outburst from the lips of David. Why this exceeding bitter cry that jars us as it comes across the far spaces of the years? It is born of the anguish of a lover. Regardless of any failure that this father may have made he was deeply devoted to his son. Then tender love is heard with even greater emphasis in this second word,—“Master, I have brought unto Thee my son.” This father took his son’s need upon himself because he cared.

This, of course, is not altogether the popular view. The mother usually gets the credit for doing all the loving in the family. Nor is it my purpose in any way to discount her love. It is about the most Christ-like something that our world has ever known. But we need to remember though father’s hand is not so skillful in petting, nor his voice so tender, he loves too, often in his rough and uncouth way. The touch of my sweet Irish mother was as tender as the petal of a rose. But when the need arose, father could be no less tender. And when he shared our troubles with us we knew that though he might be all granite on the outside he was all tenderness within. Both these fathers deeply cared for their sons.

3. Then both were men of faith. They were religious. Being men of religious faith they were naturally eager for their sons to share their faith. The first glimpse we get of this New Testament father is on his knees before our Father.
He is engaged in the holy privilege of prayer. The prayer he is offering is not for himself, but for his boy. "Master, I have brought unto Thee my son."

But if he was religious, so was David. I know David was a man of bright lights and dark shadows. I know that there were some leaves in the book of his life that were shamefully soiled. I am remembering that at his worst he was one of the greatest of sinners. But I am not forgetting that at his best he was one of the choicest of saints. They were both men of religious faith.

4. Finally, both of them left their marks for good or for ill, for weal or for woe upon the lives of their boys. Generally speaking, the influence of the mother is usually the greater and the more abiding. But this is not always the case. Few of us ever fully get away from the impressions that our fathers leave upon us. What a wonderful man Joseph must have been. It was his fatherliness that helped Jesus to come to his beautiful conception of the fatherliness of God. But Martin Luther, though he was deeply religious, could never say the Lord's Prayer with deep fervor because the word, father, brought up so many memories of a father who had been unkind and cruel. Both these men put their finger marks upon the souls of their sons. And those finger marks were not erased by all the subsequent years. Here then is where they were alike, both were fathers, both were devoted fathers, both were religious, both determined in a large measure the destiny of their son.

II.

But if they had much in common there was a wide difference between them.

1. They differed widely in their positions. They both started in a lowly place. This New Testament father who is nameless not only started as a humble man, but he continued there through all the years of his life. I daresay that his name was not known outside of his little village. He was a plain, every-day
father as so many fathers have been through the years. He was as common as the wayside grass, as ordinary as the soil. His son could never be greatly proud of him because of the high position that he occupied either in church or state. But such was not the case with the father of Absalom. David had begun as a shepherd, but he had come more and more into the limelight. By and by he had been lifted on grateful hands of his people to the highest peak of attainment. David was a king.

2. Not only did they differ in position, but they differed vastly in point of ability. Was this nameless father clever? We do not know. If so there is no indication of it. As he was ordinary in his position, I am quite sure that he was ordinary in his ability. But not so David. He was a great warrior, a great statesman, a great poet. He had a personality that was as winsome as sea music. How this brilliant son of his would have loved him if he had only had the proper chance, for at his best he was so loveable. Both of these fathers had something to give, but David had far more than this nameless father whose devotion was so beautiful.

3. Then these fathers differed in the material upon which they had to work. This nameless father had a son who was heavily handicapped. Just what was the nature of the malady from which he suffered we do not know. The people of that day thought he was possessed by demons. Perhaps he was an epileptic. Anyway the neighbors looked at the boy and shook their head and said how sorry they were for his parents. 'The boy will come to no good end, he is hopeless.' His poor father, therefore, didn't have a very promising boy therefore from which to work. From this he did not have as good a chance as David.

What of David's son? He was a lad of fine possibilities. He had his father's physical charm. He was handsome as a matinee idol. He was winsome, magnetic. He had something of his father's capacity to win friends and influence
people. Though David was on his throne and at the height of his power, his son through his personal charm was able to win such a large following as to divide the nation and all but make himself king. If this nameless father had rather lean soil to cultivate, the royal father, David, had soil that might have grown the very richest of harvest. He had a far better chance than his nameless brother.

4. The final contrast I mention is the contrast in the way in which each measured up to his privileges and to his opportunities. First, look at David. What did he do with this handsome boy of his that had in him such large capacity for good or for ill? He did not deliberately teach him to do wrong, though there is no shutting our eyes to the fact that though while David at the most of his life was religious, there was one fatal blot that left its mark upon this boy's tender soul. When Absalom went wrong, David dared not correct him. He knew what folks were saying, "He is a chip off the old block." David failed often times to set a right example. He became very religious, but he became religious after his boy's character was formed. Then it was too late to reach him.

But if David's example was not always good, his attitude toward his son was even worse. What did David do for Absalom? The answer is that he did almost nothing. He was too busy, too taken up with matters of state to cultivate the friendship of his promising boy. David was charming. How his son would have loved him if he had had a chance. But his conduct in the story of which our text is a part is typical of his whole life. When his officers went out to battle, instead of taking his son's safety in his own hands he left it to others. "Deal gently with the young man."

This, I think, brings us face to face with the dominant sin of fathers in this present day. Life has grown very strenuous, our own daily task is exacting. Some of us have a hard time keeping the wolf from the door. We feel that as
fathers we make the living, the wife ought to keep the home and rear the children. Here is perhaps the heaviest task, but no child ought to be deprived of a father. You remember that lad who went out one day to where his father was harvesting the barley. He was taken with a sudden illness and hurried help to his father. But his father was too busy. "Take him to his mother," is the order. With a disappointment in his eyes the lad turns away. How does the story end? "The boy sat on his mother's lap and then died." Perhaps he might have lived if his father had taken a little time to be with him. Many a lad who died to the best, would live if his father had only taken a bit of time to give him of himself.

But this nameless father, we do not know how clever he was, we do not know how much money he had, but we do know this, that he took his son's need upon himself. He did not try to shift his responsibility on to the shoulders of the teachers of the day school or the church school. He did not even put the responsibility for his boy upon the shoulders of his wife. When he heard that Jesus was in reach he took that needy lad by the hand and never stopped, never gave up till he knelted in his company at the feet of the Master.

How long had this father been a Christian? We do not know. I have an idea that it was the need of his son rather than his own personal need that first made him think of the Master. I have an idea that he said to himself, "I do not know about this young prophet. Perhaps I could get along without him so far as I am personally concerned, but I need his help in the raising of my son. My son needs his help or he will be robbed and cheated, and he will live but will not live abundantly. So he trusted this high task to no other hands. He took it upon himself. I know of no finer words than these, "I have brought unto Thee my son."

III.

If these men were contrasted in their conduct we are not surprised when we
see contrast in results. David had everything to give his son. His son was
capable of becoming one of the best and most useful of men. But in spite of
all that he might have been, David made a tragic failure. "O Absalom, my son,
my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son."
What is the matter? Has the king lost his crown? No. His army has won the vic-
tory and he is seated more firmly on his throne. Has he been captured? Is he
facing toward execution? No. All danger is passed. But the boy whose safety
he has committed to others is now bruised and broken bit of human wreckage at
the bottom of the pit. And David is realizing how little profit it is to gain
the whole world then to lose his own son.

At the loss of this son, David loses the sunshine out of his life. When
his boy died joy died too. David loved this wayward son. He cannot give him
up without a broken heart. But that which brings his sorrow to a climax is
the needlessness of it all. He cannot shut his eyes to the fact that the story
might have ended on a different note. He cannot blind himself to the fact that
this mangled son of his might even now have been living gloriously and usefully.
Why is such not the case? He feels that the fault is his own. He cannot but
shake his finger in his own face and say, "You did it."

I have reminded you before that children are not so much born as made.
"I am sorry now," said David, "that I did not take your needs upon my own
shoulders. I am sorry now that I have tried to stand from under my responsi-
bility. I am desperately sorry that I did not see to your safety even though it had cost me my life." I knew of a simple farmer down in Texas who gave his
life to saving his two small sons from a mad dog. That dog bit this father from
his face to his feet. He died a horrible death. But during his lucid intervals
he would smile into the face of his wife and say, "But the boys are safe aren't
they? I saw to that." But David did not see to it, therefore the remembrance
of failure kindled the fire of hell in his heart.

But this nameless father did not have as good a chance as David, but in spite of the heavy handicap he succeeded. I do not know what his son became in after days, but I can quite well imagine. One day I met a man not greatly brilliant perhaps, but with fineness of character looking out from his eyes. He becomes confidential. He tells me a story. "I had a bad start, but I was blessed in my parents. My mother was a tender and precious woman." Then he hesitates, his lip quivers a bit. "But my old dad, there is no describing him. He didn't look like much, but he had a heart of gold. He did not have much of this world to give me, but he gave me himself. The fact that I am what I am today I owe to him."

The difference in the outcome of these two boys was no accident. It was not a matter of chance, it was a matter of training. The one with much to give, with amazing possibilities had to see the undoing of his son through those possibilities. The other took the need of his boy to his own heart, unselfishly gave his best and won his boy, and brought to his own heart the fine joy of knowing that his son had made good. There are some fathers like that, thank God. I was in a home sometime ago where there was a son just finishing college. That is the age when boys are often thoughtless and indifferent. The father said something about his own closeness. This son turned on him eagerly, and yet with a touch of pain, and said, "You know, Dad, you never were selfish in your life except when you were buying something for yourself." Those two are friends. I have not seen a more beautiful relationship in all my ministry. What finer thing can you ever say in the presence of almighty God than just this, "Master I have brought unto thee my son." You can say that here, you can say it when you reach that unseen land — "where beyond these voices there is peace."
THE PRODIGAL FATHER

O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, 
O Absalom, my son, my son!

II Samuel 18:33

The drama King Lea is said to reach the highest water mark of English 
tragedy. That is, there is nothing in our literature more pathetic than King 
Lea as he learns through the disloyalty of his daughter "how sharper than a 
serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child." But here is a tragedy that 
deserves to be classed with that of King Lea. "O my son Absalom, my son, my 
son, my son Absalom." That does not sound like the cry of a father at all. 
It sounds like the heart-broken sob of some devoted mother. But strange that 
it may seem, this bitter wail was wrung from the heart of a royal father.

I.

Who is this father, and what is the matter with him? His name is David, 
king of Israel. He is breaking his heart over the tragic failure that he has 
made of his life. As this royal sufferer utters this tearful wail, he feels 
that he has made an utter mess of the business of living. There is no bright-
ness in all his yesterdays to compensate for the darkness of today. He feels 
himself an utter and absolute failure. And that tragic conviction wets his 
face with tears.

But, of course, David's failure has not been complete by any means. He
himself will doubtless realize this when time has given a touch of healing to his wounds. In many respects he has been a most successful man. In fact, his life story has the radiance and charm of a thrilling romance. Had he lived in our time, we should certainly have written a book about him. This book would have been entitled "From Shepherds Tent to Royal Palace." And we should have put it in a success series and given it to our boys for Christmas.

We love to see the ugly duckling change into a swan. We love to watch nameless and under-privileged youth climb to positions of distinction and power. We find all this in the life of David. He was a lad of very humble beginning. He was the youngest son of a farmer. Being the youngest of Jesse's stalwart sons, he was not regarded as high as his staunch brothers. Youth was more of a crime in that distant day than it is today. We can tell how little David counted by this story:

The prophet Samuel had been commanded to anoint one of Jesse's sons in token of the fact that he was one day to be king. There was no small excitement when this great prophet reached the backwoods home of farmer Jesse. At once those handsome and well-groomed sons were paraded before him. But while the prophet looked with interest, he also looked without enthusiasm. There was no light in his eye. He rather seemed perplexed. He was beginning to wonder if he had understood God a right. He still could not see any future king in these husky youths that stood before him.

At last he turned to the father and asked in perplexity "are these all your sons?" "Not exactly all," came the answer. "There is one other, the youngest, a lad named David. We did not bring him because he is the youngest, and because somebody had to stay out and watch the sheep." "We will not sit down to dinner till he comes," said the prophet. So a runner was despatched to find David. A little later this lad burst into the farmer's cottage like a handful of spring. He came like a minature sunrise. He was ruddy of face,
beams of oriental sunlight were in his hair. He was handsome enough for a
movieite. As the aged prophet looked him over he saw something here more than
physical beauty. At once he anointed him, giving as his explanation, "God
seeth not as man seeth. Man looketh on the outward parts, but God looketh
on the heart." Here was a lad with a great heart.

After this exciting experience David returned to his lowly task. There
is one fine characteristic he had. He knew that the best way to get ready for
a big job was to fill the one that he had faithfully and well. There are some
young fellows that do trifling in the little task, and wonder why somebody does
not give them a big one. They rattle about in the shell of a mustard seed and
get positively angry because somebody does not put them in a hogshead. Then
there are others that literally boil over in a little place because they do it
so well. That was the case of David. Faithful in the small things he came to
be entrusted with big things. By and by he found himself occupying the highest
place as a gift of his people.

Not only was he high in position, but he was high in character and in
usefulness. He was wise enough to know that a big position does not make a
big man. The higher you climb, the smaller you seem if you are really big.
"Pygmies will be Pygmies still though perched on the Alps," said a wise man.
Not only did David have the position of king, but he was kingly in himself.
He rendered a kingly service. So much was this the case that his people came
to look back to his achievement as the golden age of Israel.

Along with his kingly character and kingly service he had other marvelous
gifts. If one wants to know how to win friends and influence people he might
study David. He was marvelously attractive. At his worst he was a great sinner,
at his best he was a great saint. Then if tradition is true, he was a marvelous
poet. He had a flock of skylarks in his hair that he let out one by one. And
these larks will sing as long as we have a sky above our heads. David was,
therefore, a many-sided man. He was successful in a wide variety of ways.

But in spite of this we find him here sobbing over his failure. Wherein has he failed? He has not failed as a poet. He has not failed as a king. He has not failed as a statesman and warrior. But he has failed in a field that is of supreme importance. He has failed as a father. That is the most tragic of all failures. However great our success in other fields, however conspicuous our achievements in other directions, none of these can atone for our failure as father and mothers. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own boy?". That is a question David is asking as he thinks of his own handsome son, now a bit of mangled wreckage at the bottom of a pit in the wilderness. David would be very much at home in our modern life. I have known quite a few like him. Men who succeeded in everything else except at the biggest of all enterprises.

II.

But why does he take this failure so hard? Why does he not shrug his shoulders and say "Well, it is none of my business. I will leave the training of the kids to my wife, I have the living to make. I have not time for anything like home-making, or church going. My wife is the praying member and I am the paying member." But David somehow cannot shrug this tragic burden of failure off his shoulders. Why not?

1. He cannot take the matter lightly because he really loved that wayward boy of his. I know this sounds a bit surprising. Mothers get the credit for doing all the loving that is done in a family. Mother's name is a signal in any congregation for hankershiefs, while Dads is a signal for howls. We have taught this sentimental slush until we have helped Dad to lose his place in the family and become a little better than an outcast.
By this I do not mean, of course, to suggest that we ought to make less of a mother’s love. I am well aware that it is about the most Christ-like something that we know. But I do think we too often forget that fathers care is just as genuine as mothers. My own mother, with her lovely Irish wit, with her native tenderness, was loving and loveable beyond words. My father was inclined to ruggedness and sternness. Yet, knowing them both, I knew that at heart he was just as tender as she. And in times of crisis I have seen that innate tenderness come out and smile, till the thought of it melts my heart to this day. David is sobbing because he loved.

2. David is sobbing because he is realizing that he has not only failed, but he has failed needlessly. Absalom was gifted and marvellously handsome, but he was selfish and ambitious. He led a rebellion against his father. He became guilty of high treason. But that does not mean that he was a traitor born. He was not foredoomed from his birth to play the sad and unhappy role that he did play. Even in that distant day David was wise enough to know that.

For the Bible is very emphatic that children are not so much born as made. “Train up a child in the way it should go and when it is old it will not depart from it.” This assertion of the Scriptures is affirmed and reinforced by modern science. Psychology is just as emphatic as the Bible in its assertion that children are not so much born as made. This assertion is also borne out by commonsense and by experience. David would have grieved had he known that failure with his son was inevitable, but his grief was all the heavier when he realized that it need not have been so. He might have made Absalom into an entirely different kind of man instead of a traitor. He might have made him into a faithful and loyal supporter and friend. No wonder, therefore, that his heart broke. “Of all the sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest of these is ‘it might have been.’”

4. Finally, David is sobbing over this failure because he realized its
finality. There are many undertakings at which we may have a second chance. Having failed once we encourage ourselves by saying "I will do better next time." That is fine. There is so often a next time. Let us thank God for that. There is a land of beginning again even though we strike out once, we get to go to the bat again.

"Each day is a new beginning,
Each morn is the world made new;
O ye who are weary of sinning,
Here is a chance for each of you."

But there are some things that do not have a next time. One of them is the rearing of a son. You have a little child in your home, a lovely little boy. You desire to make him into a good man. But you may fail. If you do, your failure is final. There is just one chance for you, and no second chance forever more. Here of all places--

"The moving finger writes,
And having writ moves on,
Nor all your piety nor wit
Can lure it back to cancel half a line.
Nor all your tears wipe out a single of it."

The realization that left David utterly crushed is this:—That he had failed with his boy, and that failure was final. We have only one chance to rear our boys and girls. This man threw his chance away. No wonder he sobbed.

III.

Why did David fail? Of course, he did not fail because he did not care. We have already pointed out the fact that these tears are the reminders of his tender love.

1. The first reason for his failure was neglect. He was a very busy man.
There were a thousand calls upon his time. He allowed himself, therefore, to
got so busy doing the secondary that he forgot the primary. What he did in the
story of which our text is a part is typical, I daresay of his whole life. Look
at the story:-David's forces are going out to meet the army of his rebellious son.
Being a true father, he is far more concerned about the safety of his son than
he is about his own victory. But in spite of this he trusted the safety of that
erring boy to the care of his officials. He fails to go and see to his safety
himself. But his parting word is this:-"Deal gently with the young man for my
sake." Thus he delegates his responsibility to others.

With this charge ringing in their ears, the officers take command and the
army marches out to battle. A long fearful day wears away. By and by a runner
comes with tidings. He tells of victory. But the old man is not merely a king,
he is a father. He is not interested in the victory. His one question is this:-
"Is the young man Absalom safe?" Then he learns the sad truth, and goes sobbing
to his chamber with these tragic words, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom,
would God I had died for thee." I am sorry now that I did not take your safety
upon myself, even had it cost me my life.

How then did David come to lose his boy? He passed the buck. He put
the responsibility for his safety on other shoulders. That, I daresay, he had
been doing through the years. That, many fathers do today. It is so easy.
I daresay it was never quite so easy as now. We turn our children over to
their mothers, to the teachers of the day school, to the teachers of the Sunday
School, to the movies, and to the streets. We do everything except taking it
upon ourselves. David and Absalom might have been more than father and son, they
might have been loving devoted friends. But they never got really to know
each other. What a tragedy!

How then did David destroy his son? His first weapon was neglect. That
is ever a deadly weapon. I have reminded you again and again that all that is
necessary to destroy a business, a church, a friendship, a home, a boy, is just to do nothing. "How shall we escape if we neglect?" There is no escape. Traitors like Absalom are not born they are made by the neglect of those who should train them for strong and God-fearing manhood.

2. A second reason for David's failure was his bad example. For the major part of his life this father had been a good man. But there was one dark chapter in his story. For once he had played the prodigal in a ghastly and horrible fashion. One day he saw a woman that he coveted. She was a woman to whom he had no right. But in spite of the fact that she was the wife of another man he took her. By and by he had to kill her husband in order to keep his secret. His adultery was committed in the heat of passion. We find it possible to forgive that. But his murder was committed against a friend and in cold blood. That was a crime that almost none can forgive but God. Though David repented of this sin, and was mightily forgiven, yet that black chapter left a smirch upon his family. When later his son Amnon coveted a woman he took her as his father had done. Absalom, the future traitor struck him dead. For the woman he took was his sister. Thus the breach was widened between father and son. Thus David helped to destroy his son by his bad example.

That which brought David's sorrow to its very climax is the realization of this fact: His grief was all the more bitter because he himself has repented and is now a good man. There is no sin that God will not forgive. But even forgiveness does not always undo the past. When the prodigal came home, there was no end of joy. But there was an untold tragedy connected with this beautiful homecoming. There were boon companions that went with the prodigal into the far country that not join him when he came home. You might commit a sin tonight, and repent of that sin ten years from tonight. That repentance might bring to you personal salvation, but it may fail utterly in the saving of your son.

When I was a boy our nearest neighbor was a solid sensible man with a large family
of sons and daughters. He was a drinking man, though not a drunkard. He had no use for the things of religion. He never went about the church. But strange to say, when he was an old man, after all his children were grown, he was soundly and happily converted. While he yearned that his children share his precious faith, he was powerless to reach them. A passionate earnestness that once would have broken their hearts now only made them ashamed. David failed through neglect and through a bad example, and his failure was inevitable. If you are to avoid like tragedy you must give yourself to the knowing and the living with your children now, and the setting of a right sort of example, not tomorrow but today.
No man could pass Absalom on the street without taking a second look at him. No woman could pass him without taking more than two. Had he lived in our day he would have been "Mr. America" or "Mr. Universe," for he would have won every beauty contest. What a calamity that he had to live before the day of the movie! He would certainly have out-made Mac West. In all seriousness, he was the finest of all specimens of physical manhood. He had no blemish anywhere. But his crowning touch of beauty was his hair. Men with ordinary suits of hair looked at him and turned green with envy. Bald-headed men were seized with positive indignation.

Now, a physical beauty is a real asset. (I speak as one who ought to know.) It is especially true when coupled with something else, because beauty without brains doesn't get very far. Sometimes beauty only serves to make the absence of brains the more conspicuous. A fine physical appearance ceases to be an asset when the possessor of such a gift has nothing else. Some years ago I went to hear a man speak. He was a fine figure of a man. Looking at him you would naturally expect the ringing voice with a touch of music in it. But he had a mouse-squeak of a voice that was all the more disappointing because of the fine appearance of the man. But Absalom was no fool. He had inherited something of the apparent mentality of his father. As you read his story you cannot fail to realize that he was about the ablest politician of his day.
Another inheritance that came to him from his highly
gifted father was a vast deal of personal magnetism. So attractive
was he that he captivated all that came into his presence. Even
though a private citizen, he soon had run past his immensely attrac-
tive father in point of personal popularity. That in itself speaks
volumes for the wakensomeness of Absalom. David had a marvelous
gift for winning the love of people. When he was young and unknown,
Jonathan virtually uncrowned himself because of his love for David.

Another time when David was hiding in the fastness of the mountains
and wanted a drink from the well of Bethlehem, three ruffians
ventured their lives just to bring him a drink of water. David
had been lifted on the loving hands of the people to the highest
position they could give him, but magnetic Absalom even ran past
him in popularity.

Then, Absalom was a man of dash and daring. He was
possessed of the reckless courage of his father. There was nothing
of which he was afraid. When his brother, Amnon, had outraged his
sister and the king refused to punish him, Absalom took the law
in his own hands and killed him as ruthlessly as he would have
killed a snake. For this he went into exile for awhile. When he
returned, he asked for an interview with Joab, the commander in
chief of the army. Joab refused to come. Therefore, Absalom went
out and set his field on fire and thus had his interview. He
smoked Joab out of his office and compelled him to do his will.
He was a man of a mad courage that balked at nothing.

II.

Here, then, is a man of great gifts, a man of fine
possibilities. His whole nation, indeed the whole world, sought
to be the better for the vast talents that have been committed to
his case. But such was not the case. He proved a disappointment and a  
curse, both to himself and to all whose lives he touched.  
Handsome, brilliant, attractive, courageous, every fine possibility  
was in the reach of his hand. But he himself and the whole world  
would have been better off had he been born a stupid and repellent  
hunch-back.

Some time ago I spoke to you on the theme of "Capitalizing  
on our Calamities." There are those who through faith and courage  
take their very liabilities and change them into assets, who trans-  
form their weights into wings. While I was pastor in Washington,  
George B. Stuart, then pastor of this church, came to preach for  
me. As soon as I met him I saw that two of his upper front teeth  
were missing. The fact didn't come after careful scrutiny. It  
fairly shrieked at me in the distance. I could not but wonder  
how he could overcome such a handicap, but I soon found out.  
Upon my introduction, he stepped forward saying, "Two or three  
months ago I took a hurting in this shoulder. I went to see the  
doctor and he said 'It's your teeth.' I said, 'No such thing,  
they don't reach down that far.' But I had to have them out, and  
the dentist made me a beautiful plate. Just before I started up  
here, I broke that plate. When that happened, my wife didn't  
want me to come. Then I said, 'That's all right, thank the Lord  
I still have my tongue left.' When I get up there I will explain  
it to them. The simple people will understand, and it don't  
make any difference about the fool no how.' 'Now,' he said, 'I'm  
here with my tongue. If any of you are not interested in my  
tongue, you can just look at the hole.'" And he had changed his  
handicap into a help.
That has been done millions of times. That was what
Joseph did as he made his roadway through a slave pen to lead
up to a palace on the Nile. That was what Paul did as he brought
his thorn to Jesus and had Him to touch it with the finger of
His power till it became more fragrant than a rose. That was what
Bunyan did as, with body in prison, his soul roamed in the
highlands with God. That is what all of us may do. We can change
our losses into gains, our want into wealth. We can learn to say
with Paul: "We know that all things work together for good to them
that love God."

But Absalom took the opposite course. He not only
failed to capitalize his calamities; he made a calamity out of
his capital. Things that were intended to give him wings became
galling and ruinous weights. The things that might have made him
unspeakably rich made him horribly poor. The things that might
have made him a moral and spiritual king made him a destitute
and pathetic pauper. It is bad enough to accept our calamities
as calamities, but to take our very wealth and change it into
ghastly want, that is possibly life's supreme tragedy.

Yet it is a tragedy that we witness almost every day.
I have seen bees drawn in their own honey, and I have seen men
and women drawn in the very wealth of their gifts, and the very
fullness of their opportunities. Some time ago a young chap
with millions of dollars to his credit blew his brains out.
What was the matter? Was he cribbed, cabined and confined? Was
he one of those of whom Gray sang:

"But knowledge to his eyes her ample scroll
Rich to the spoils of time did ne'er unroll,
Chill penury expressed his noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul."

No, he was rather crushed to death under the avalanches of his own
wealth. The same has often happened with large intellectual gifts.
As I think of the first honored men that I have known, most of them proved utter failures. They left life a little more bleak than they found it. How did this man change his gifts into losses? How did he come to wreck himself?

1. He allowed his vast gifts to make him vain and conceited, rather than humble. As I have studied human nature, I am of the opinion that we tend to be far more conceited over our gifts than we are over our achievements. Take physical beauty and charm, for example. They are gifts. Nobody can make themselves really beautiful. They are as truly inheritances as is a fortune. Yet how many people so gifted have nobody to thank for such gifts but themselves? The man who makes money is usually far less conceited over it than the one who inherits it. The less credit that is due us for any gift that has come to us, the greater credit we tend to take. Absalom was greatly gifted. No credit was due on that account to anybody but himself.

Accepting his vast gift as coming from his own hand, he was without gratitude. He never thought gratefully of those that had enabled him to be what he was. That, too, is human nature. If we have a physical or intellectual defect, if we are born with some mental or moral quirk, that makes the wrong course easy, we are prone to ease that on somebody else. If we take the easy path of sensuality or of drunkenness, we want to fling the responsibility upon the shoulder of some grandfather. But those gifts that deserve are despicable, that make us conspicuous physically, intellectually, they are due to nobody but ourselves.

Then, Absalom, being without gratitude, was, also, without any sense of obligation. If opportunities had come to him as a gift from others, then he owed it to those who were living and those
who should come after to make the best use of those gifts. 
He was a debtor just as we all are. But in these high quali-
fications, Absalom was an utter dwarf. With all his fine body and 
his fine mind, he was a political imbecile. So is every man who 
never learns to say, "I owe, and I ought, and I must."

Absalom had no sense of obligation, even to his father 
from whom he had inherited so richly. Of course Absalom did not 
see his father through our eyes. To him, David was far from being 
a hero. Nor, was Absalom altogether to blame. David was a great 
warrior and a great statesman. At his best he was a great singer; 
but at his worst he was a great sinner, and he was almost an utter 
failure as a father. He set his sons a bad example. He could not 
control them because his own sins made him afraid.

Take the case of Ammon for example. Ammon, as Absalom, 
had grown up to do as he pleased. He had been considerably a 
rebel from the beginning. One version of the Bible tells us that 

He loved him too well to punish him. Many feel that way today. 
But loving a boy too well to control him is like loving him too 
well to have an operation when he is suffering from appendicitis, or 
having a broken bone set. It was this lack of control that made a 
rapist out of Ammon, a murderer out of Absalom.

Then, as I hinted, there was another element. David 
couldn't control his boys for fear that they would see mud in the 
bottom of his own eyes. When I was pastor in a Texas town some 
years ago, a young fellow who was farming with his father went 
away to the city to get the needed supplies for the year. While 
there he got drunk and came home with nothing except empty pockets 
and an aching head. Naturally his father was indignant. But when 
he began to press his son, the son stopped him with this word:
"You know who gave me the first drink I ever took - it was you. And when I got drunk I only did what you do, and what you had taught me to do." And David, by his sin and folly, had made a home in which it was hard for children to grow into the right kind of men and women. Absalom grew up thankless, without any sense of obligation, without any loyalty.

Finally, Absalom, so far as we can see, was completely selfish. I do not believe that even Cain nor Judas, nor any other rogue we have studied were so completely and utterly selfish as Absalom. As we read his life, as we study his record, we find no trace of a single generous note, or of a single unselfish act. For him, all roads led to Rome, and he was Rome. He looked out strictly for number one without any regard to the loss or pain that he might cause to others.

IV.

And what was the outcome of it all? Life for him ended in tragedy. His was an open and palpable tragedy. But the tragedy would have been no less, possibly even greater, in the eyes of the world he had won.

He stole the hearts of the people of Israel. He stole them in the sense that he won their love and gave them nothing in return. When he had found the man on his way to see the king about some difficulty, he always told him that he was entirely right, whether he thought so or not. He flung his arm around every Tom, Dick and Harry, and kissed him as if he were the most personal friend. But all that he was doing was playing the politician, to win their simple hearts that when he rebelled and declared himself king, they would become his followers.
At last the great day came, and he set up his
thrones in Hebron. The multitude rallied to him, and his heart-
broken old father had to flee for his life. I think the loss of
the kingdom meant something to David, but the loss of his boy
meant even more. For, in spite of his neglect, he loved Absalom
with passionate devotion. But he had to learn in that awful
hour how sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless
child.

The final scene is the battle between the forces of the
king and forces of Absalom. David didn’t go out to the battle as
he had done many a time before. He put the responsibility for
his boy into the hands of others. He did as so many fathers and
mothers are doing today, simply passing the buck, putting the
safety of his children into the hands of a nurse, into the hands
of a teacher, into the hands of the state, into the hands of the
movies, into any hands that would leave them free with nothing
about which to bother. "See to it," warned David, "that no harm
comes to Absalom." But it was his business to see to it himself.
And now the battle is fought. The armies of Absalom have been
defeated, and the young traitor is fleeing for his life, and
it seems like a bit of grim irony that that hair of his that had
been such a source of pride became the ruin of him, for it got
caught on the branch of a tree and left him kicking his heels
between heaven and earth. Joab found him there, thrust three
darts through his heart. He then flung himself into a pit and
piled a heap of rough stones upon his mangled and once beautiful
body. What an illustration of those words of Jesus where it is
said: "He that seeketh to save his life shall lose it," for the
The supreme tragedy of Absalom was in that through his self-centeredness he killed his finer self; he destroyed his soul.

Then, when Absalom was dead, a runner was dispatched to tell David. And the old man has now forgotten that he is a king with his nation in rebellion against him. He remembers, too late, that he is a father. He makes no effort for victory. The one question that bursts from his lips is this: "Is the young man Absalom safer?" The first messenger refuses to tell him. The second blurts out the sordid story. And David mounts to his room--a broken old man. And we hear his sobs across the far spaces of the years. It is the hopeless, futile, desperate sound of a father who stood from under. "Oh Absalom, my son, my son Absalom, would God I had died for thee, Oh Absalom, my son, my son!"
The keenest heart-sore of David is that he feels not only that he has lost his boy, but that he has lost, in a large measure, through the fault of himself. And so it was. But the sin of David does not excuse the sin of Absalom. His is the sin of all self-centered souls who, seeking to save their lives, throw them utterly away.

He failed to continue: "Buy with silver in Gilead..."
ABSALOM AND DANIEL

"So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel."

II Samuel 15:6

"Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself."

Daniel 1:8

I.

As a study of contrast, the choice of Absalom and Daniel is very happy. These two brilliant and gifted young men are as far apart in philosophies of life as night from day, or as life from death. It is easy to see what values these two men counted as of supreme worth. They were both firmly convinced that they knew the things that were the most worth living for. This gives us the key to their characters and to their destinies. Tell me the things that you really put first and I can tell you what you are. I can also tell you what increasingly you will become.

1. Take first the philosophy of Absalom. What was Absalom's faith? What was his philosophy? He believed that it was the supreme wisdom to look out for number one. He thought the supreme sanity was to please himself. He was the sun of his own world. The one question that he put as he faced every situation was, "Where do I come in?" The decisive issue that determined the road he would take when he stood at the parting of the ways was which turn will bring the greater benefit to me? He was as sure as Hitler, he was as
sure, as multitudes of us, that the only sensible way to get on in a world like ours is to say, "Every fellow for himself and the devil take the hindmost."

2. Daniel had the opposite philosophy. He had convictions that led in the opposite direction. There were many prizes that Absalom coveted that Daniel did not despise. But while he thought Absalom's objectives were of worth, he did not think them of supreme worth. He believed that the thing of first importance was to keep peace with God and his own conscience. He refused to make himself the center of his own world. He refused to put first this question, "Where do I come in?" When he stood at the forks of the road he asked, not which way is easy or which way will make me the richer in things. He asked which way is right?

The contrasts between these two are the same contrasts that separate men and women today. Jesus often offends people by dividing them into two groups. He seems to have an arbitrary way of saying that folks are like the Bridesmaids, some are wise and some are foolish. He declares that some build upon rocks and some build upon sand. He declares that some are alive spiritually and some are spiritually dead. Of course, among the living there are varied degrees of life. Some have on the thinnest rivulet of life while some are living abundantly. But the division holds. Then he might have divided them into the self-centered and into the God-centered. For at the last long last we strike our flag either to things or to God. Every day, you stand at the forks of the road, you make your decision according to the faith of Absalom or according to the faith of Daniel.

Jesus declared that the results of such choices were wide and fundamental. He stated it in this fashion, "He that seeketh to save his life shall lose it, but he that loseth his life for my sake shall keep it unto life eternal." Such
a word does not shock us amidst the sanctities of a religious service, but it seems strangely out of place amidst the hurry and bustle of our modern life. But, this is eternally true. It is true in every age. It is true in every situation. The man who lives for himself does not in a sense live at all. The man who forgets himself, the man who lives a dedicated life, lives abundantly. He does so in the here and now. He does so through the eternal ages. The lives of Absalom and Daniel tend but to dramatize the truth of the words of Jesus.

II.

Look first at Absalom. This striking young man had great gifts. He was perhaps the most handsome man of his day. "From the sole of his foot," the story says, "to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him." The pity is that he lived before the movies. What a movie idol he would have been. Though so perfect physically, his crowning glory was his hair. It was as abundant as it was beautiful. It was his pride. Here again he missed much by living too soon. Had he only lived today his picture would have been in every show window with a finger pointing to, "Use Dreen," or "Danderine did this and I can prove it."

But Absalom was more than a fine physical specimen. He was shrewd, intelligent, magnetic. He had abilities that would have carried him far had he used them wisely. But he had this fatal defect, he was out to please himself. He was thoroughly selfish. Now selfishness does not always lead in the same direction. Some men make self their master and go to the gutter. Others go to congress. Some worshipping the god of self and in the penitentiary. Others on the platform of a popular pulpit, or in the episcopacy. The important matter is not the differing goals to which these men travel, it is the common motive that lies back of both goals. Self-centeredness is the
fountain source of all evil. It is the Lake Itasca from which flows every Mississippi of iniquity.

1. Absalom was exceedingly eager to be popular. Such a desire is perfectly moral. Everybody ought to be popular. Other, being equal, the measure of my usefulness, as that of yours, is the measure of our popularity. But the trouble with Absalom was that he set about the winning of this popularity for a wrong motive. He was not seeking the confidence and friendship of his fellows in order that he might the better serve them. He was seeking their confidence and friendship in order that they might the better serve him. He studied how to win friends in order to use them for his own purpose. All his personal contacts were made for selfish reasons. He was as selfish in his courtesies and his kindnesses as a thug in his stealing.

2. But if his motives were wrong, his methods were wise. He used one that is true and tried. It seldom fails to work. He agreed with everybody. He told all and sundry that they were exactly right. He flattered. He told a thousand soft lies. He complimented brazenly and boldly. He fairly sopped his bon bons of flattery in honey. It is wonderful to this day how we eat such stuff up. It is wonderful how many employ it, even good ministers are not above it.

Watch Absalom work. He is out before the palace gate watching the people come to bring their complaints before the king. He meets them first. He listens to what they have to say. However unjust and unreasonable their complaints may be, he tells them earnestly that they are exactly right. Then he sighs and says "what a pity that they haven't somebody on the throne wise enough to see how right they are and thus grant their requests. If I were only king," he said, "I would see that you got justice." Then when this elated dupe would start to bow his way out of his presence, Absalom would seize him by the hand and give him an affectionate kiss.
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What a politician! How many millions have learned from Absalom across the years. What was wrong with Absalom? Is it wrong to compliment your friend? No. It is wrong not to, if you think he deserves it. I am not claiming for a moment that a porcupine is more lovely than a maltese cat. The machinery of the world would run far more smoothly if it was oiled more often by appreciation. Absalom was wrong because he was lying. He was flattering folks in order to use them to his own purpose. The author says, "that he thus stole the hearts of the men of Israel." The man who wins friends in such a fashion is as much a thief as a pickpocket.

3. Not only did Absalom steal the hearts of the people of Israel, but he stole his father's crown. That was the goal he had in view all along. His eagerness to help those in trouble, his handshaking, his kissing, all this had in view the using of people to the winning of the crown of Israel. It mattered not to him that his father was already king. It mattered not to this self-centered politician that in crowning himself he would uncrown the father that loved him. He was out strictly in the interest of himself. At last his hour came. The duped people rallied to him. His father saw his kingdom torn by rebellion. That was a great heartache. But the saddest tragedy of it all was that he had to learn, "How sharper than a serpant's tooth it is to have a thankless child."

4. What of the outcome? Absalom's reign was short-lived. Those loyal to the throne rallied under Joab and went out to meet rebellious Absalom in battle. Broken hearted David did not have the courage to go. As his own soldiers went he urged them, however, to see that no harm came to Absalom. The battle was fought and Absalom lost. As he fled through the forest riding a mule that luxurious hair of his caught in a tree, and left him kicking his heels between earth and heaven. As often happens, the thing in which he prided himself most, his hair, helped to work his ruin. Joab came and thrust...
three darts into his heart and flung his body into a pit and threw a heap of stones upon him. There was no epitaph, but he might have written this,—"He that seeketh to save his life shall lose it."

What was the tragedy of this self-centered man? It was not merely the fact that he soon lost the crown that he had won by rebellion and treachery; it was simply the fact that he was conquered in battle and killed. His tragedy would have been little, if any the worse, had he been victorious. The horrible failure of Absalom was that choosing to live for himself he missed all that was best in the life that now is as well as in that which is to come. This is not the case in exceptionable instances, it is the case every time, everywhere. It is the case with those who are decent and those who are indecent. It is the case with the cultured and refined as well as the depraved. He that seeketh to save his life misses the life that is real. This is true because the self-centered life shuts God out. And missing God we miss all that really counts.

III.

Let us turn now to this bright and bracing story of Daniel. Daniel's is really a Tale of Two Cities.

Among the Judean hills there stood a little walled city called Jerusalem. This city was the religious and political capitol of one of the most remarkable peoples the world has ever known. These people have this distinction that above all others they have been the moral and religious teachers of mankind. Every book of our Bible was written by a Jew except two, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. There is wide spread hate of the Jews today, but we owe to them a debt that is unpayable. They not only gave us our Bible, but they gave us our Christ.

Five hundred miles to the East there stood another city called Babylon.
This city was one of the greatest of the ancient world. We are told that it was surrounded by a wall that stood foursquare. This wall was fifty six miles in circumference. It towered to the height of three hundred feet. It was wide enough on top for six war chariots to drive abreast. Down through the midst of this city flowed the river Euphrates. On either side the river were builded marvelous temples and palaces. Here was the famous temple of Bel. On the opposite bank were the royal palaces, a city in itself. Here were the famous Hanging Gardens, one of the seven wonders of the world. King Nebuchadnessar had married a girl from the hill country. She was homesick in these prosaic low lands. Therefore, he builded her an artful hill. Upon the sides of this hill grew forest trees. Down its sides flowed streams of water that were carried to the heights by hydraulic pressure. These streams were played upon by varied colored lights that made the whole scene a dream of beauty.

Now out from this city had marched an army against Jerusalem. The little city was not able to withstand the might of Babylon. It was conquered, its temple was sacked, and all the silver and gold was taken. But the most priceless treasure that the king took with him as he marched back in triumph was some of the most choice youth. Arriving at Babylon these exiles were objects of curiosity. Their captives knowing their love for music asked them for a song. But they hung their harps upon songless silence on the willows and wept as they remember their far off home. "How" they asked, "can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

But a better day dawns for some of their number. A few days later bustling officers from the king's court are among them. They select the choicest youth in order to train them for government positions. Among those chosen is a young chap some sixteen years of age named Daniel. He along with others is taken to the palace of the king. Soon after their arrival Daniel faces a turning point
in his life. He is made to recline at a table spread with dainties from the table of the king. As he looks upon these dainties he realizes that he cannot eat them without doing violence to his conscience. What is he to do about it? There were seemingly the best of reasons why Daniel should eat.

1. If he refuses he will have to stand alone. He would seem peculiar. He will make himself ridiculous. Everybody else is eating, why be silly? There are few things that we dread so much as failing to conform to the usages of the crowd with which we find ourselves. How many take their first step downward, not because of the appeal that that false step has in itself. They take it because they dare not refuse to be like the crowd in which they find themselves.

2. Then Daniel was sorely tempted to conform because many of the supports that he had known in other days were lacking now. Once he had had the backing of a pious home, but that is behind him. Once he had been taught that the God of Israel was greater than all other Gods, and that He would deliver Israel from the hand of any enemy. But he has found that this is a mistake. God is either not as strong as he thought or he does not work as he once thought he worked. His faith is not so clear as it once was.

3. Then he is tempted because it seems the only way he can get on. "If I conform," he said to himself, "I will escape from slavery. I will come to a position of prestige and power. On the contrary, if I fail to conform it might cost me my life."

Here then is the test--What does Daniel count most worthwhile? What are those values that he puts first? We find the answer in this brave word, "Daniel purpose in his heart that he would not defile himself." Maybe he said that God is not just as I thought he was. Maybe I have been mistaken in my faith. But I believe it is better to be clean than unclean whether my faith
is true or false. It may be that I will lose my position and my life by taking this course. But I can afford not to live, but I cannot afford to be untrue to the best that I know while I do live. When a storm was raging off Cape Hatras years ago, the lifeguards discovered a ship going to pieces. The captain ordered the lowering of the life boats. "But the wind is seaward," one of his men complained. "We can get out there but we can never get back." "It is not necessary to get back," came the answer. "It is necessary to go."

What was the result of Daniel's choice? Absalom made a wrong choice and went to weakness and to death. Daniel made a right choice, and the story says that he prospered. It is a suggestive word. Of course the author has in mind that he got on materially. Now material prosperity does not always follow in the wake of loyalty to conscience. Some men have lost their material wealth through loyalty. Some have lost their life. Yet, other things being equal, loyalty to your convictions is most profitable in the life that now is.

Years ago a speaker was announced to lecture in my church against legalized liquor. One of my stewards wrote me a special delivery letter protesting against the forthcoming address. "This is purely a political question," he declared, "and questions of politics have no place in the Church." This man was a heavy contributor. In fact, his contribution was thirty-six hundred dollars a year. When I received this letter I saw that money taking wings and I needed it desperately for we were carrying a heavy debt.

But I knew but one reply to make so I wrote him a letter. "My dear Friend," I said. "I see from your recent communication that you are a convinced wet. It so happens that I am a convinced dry. That being the case, the only way I know how to keep my self respect and to hold your respect for me is to act like one. Therefore, the address will go on. It will not be the first time a lecture of this kind has been held in the Methodist Church, and I am sure
it will not be the last." This brother wrote me a lovely letter. Not only so, but he kept on sending in his thirty-six hundred dollars a year. But my letter would have been just as successful if he had never paid another penny.

Daniel prospered in the very coin that Absalom wanted and missed. Absalom was out after popularity. He was eager for the confidence of his people. He desired political power, but he missed it. Daniel was seeking above all else to be loyal to the best that he knew and he won these lesser values as by-products. He became the most popular, the best loved man in Babylon. Even his enemies trusted him with a confidence that nothing could shake.

Take this picture for instance. Daniel has become so powerful that they have decided that it is necessary to get rid of him. They hold a conference to devise ways and means. "There is only one chance," the keenest one suggests. "That is to maneuver him into a position where he will have to choose between his loyalty to his king and to his conscience. If we can get him in that position he will decide for his conscience. Then we will have him." What a compliment! Therefore, they had the silly old king to pass a law that nobody was to pray to anyone but the king himself for thirty days. Then we read this fine word. "When Daniel knew that the writing was signed. He went up into his chamber, the window being opened unto Jerusalem and prayed three times a day as he had done aforetime." He had found the path to power.

But far bigger than his material prosperity was his prosperity of soul. Putting God and his conscience first he had come really to live. He came to possess a quality of life over which death has no power. Glamorous Babylon has been a heap of ruins long centuries. There is only one thing left standing of the Babylon of that distant day. What is that? It is not the king's palace. It is not those tremendous city walls. It is not the tower of Babylon. The
one thing left is the character of Daniel.

Which, let me ask, of these two brilliant and gifted men found life the more worth living? Who made the finer contribution to his own day and to the coming centuries? Absalom robbed his fellows. He broke the heart of the one who loved him best. He hid his own money safe and wrecked himself. He cheated himself for time and for eternity. Daniel on the other hand found the best in the life that now is as well as in that which is to come. That does not happen now and then at rare intervals, it always happens. To put self first is to die. To put God and conscience first is to live. Yesterday, today, and forever this is true. "He that seeketh to save his life shall lose it, and he that loseth it for my sake shall have life eternal."