

20. Appearance and Reality

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now we come to our Bible reading, which is 2 Samuel chapter 14, and that can be found on page 265.

Continuing the story of how after David's sin with Bathsheba and Uriah, the judgment promised by Nathan the prophet worked its way out in his family.

As this chapter opens, Absalom, the king's son, has been banished because of his murderous action. In having his own brother killed.

So let's read chapter 14. Now Joab, the son of Zeruiah, knew that the king's heart went out to Absalom.

Better translated, the king's heart was against Absalom. That makes more sense of what follows. And Joab sent to Tekoa and brought from there a wise woman and said to her, Pretend to be a mourner and put on mourning garments.

[0 : 59] Do not anoint yourself with oil, but behave like a woman who has been mourning many days for the dead. Go to the king and speak thus to him. So Joab put words in her mouth.

When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and paid homage and said, Save me, O king. The king said to her, What is your trouble? She answered, Alas, I'm a widow.

My husband is dead. And your servant had two sons and they quarreled with one another in the field. There was no one to separate them. And one struck the other and killed him.

And now the whole clan has risen up against your servant. And they say, Give up the man who struck his brother. May put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed.

And so they would destroy the heir also. Thus they would quench my coal that is left and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth.

[1 : 59] Then the king said to the woman, Go to your house and I will give orders concerning you. And the woman of Tekoa said to the king, On me be the guilt, my lord, the king.

And on my father's house, let the king and his throne be guiltless. The king said, If anyone says anything to you, bring him to me and he shall never touch you again.

Then she said, Please let the king invoke the lord your God, that the avenger of blood kill no more and my son be not destroyed. The king said, As the lord lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground.

And the woman said, Please let your servant speak a word to my lord, the king. He said, Speak. And the woman said, Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God?

For in giving this decision, the king convicts himself inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again. We must all die. We are like water spilled on the ground which cannot be gathered up again.

[3 : 03] God will not take away life and he devises means so that the banished one will not remain an outcast. Now I have come to say this to my lord, the king, because the people have made me afraid.

And your servant thought, I will speak to the king. It may be that the king will perform the request of his servant. For the king will hear and deliver his servant from the hand of the man who would destroy me and my son together from the heritage of God.

And your servant thought, The word of my lord, the king, will set me at rest. For my lord, the king, is like an angel of God to discern good and evil. The Lord your God be with you.

Then the king answered the woman, Do not hide from me anything I ask you. The woman said, Let my lord, the king, speak. The king said, Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?

The woman answered and said, As surely as you live, my lord, the king, one cannot turn to the right hand or to the left from anything that my lord, the king, has said. It was your servant Job who commanded me.

[4 : 11] It was he who put all these words in the mouth of your servant. In order to change the course of things your servant Joab did, My lord has wisdom, like the wisdom of the angel of God, to know all things that are on earth.

Then the king said to Joab, Behold, now I grant this. Go, bring back the young man Absalom. And Joab fell on his face to the ground and paid homage and blessed the king.

And Joab said, Today your servant knows that I have found favor in your sight, my lord, the king, in that the king has granted the request of his servant.

So Joab arose and went to Geshur and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. And the king said, Let him dwell apart in his own house. He is not to come into my presence. And Absalom lived apart in his own house and did not come into the king's presence.

Now, in all Israel, there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head, there was no blemish in him.

[5 : 18] And he cut the hair of his head for every year, end of every year, he used to cut it. When it was heavy on him, he cut it. He weighed the hair of his head 200 shekels by the king's weight.

There were born to Absalom three sons and one daughter whose name was Tamar. She was a beautiful woman. So Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem without coming into the king's presence.

Then Absalom sent for Joab to send him to the king, but Joab would not come to him. And he sent a second time, but Joab would not come. And he said to his servant, See, Joab's field is next to mine.

He has barley there. Go set it on fire. So Absalom's servant set the field on fire. Then Joab arose and went to Absalom at his house and said to him, Why have your servants set my field on fire?

Absalom answered Joab, Behold, I sent word to you. Come here that I may send you to the king to ask, Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still.

[6 : 23] Now therefore, let me go into the presence of the king. And if there is guilt in me, let him put me to death. Then Joab went to the king and told him, and he summoned Absalom.

So he came to the king and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom. This is the word of the Lord.

Amen. Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 265, 2 Samuel 14. We'll have a moment of prayer and ask the Lord's help.

Father, your word penetrates right into our hearts to the dividing of joint and marrow. Nothing is hidden from its light.

And so we pray as we look together at this uncomfortable chapter, as we consider what it has to say to us, that you will indeed lead us to the living Christ, the light of the world, the one who dispels the shadows.

[7 : 31] And we pray that the result of our meeting together will be that our hearts will burn within us, and our eyes will be opened as the living Lord speaks to us through the word.

And we ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. I don't know how many of you watch plays or read plays.

Probably most of you have seen a version of Macbeth or read it at school. And at the very beginning of that play, the Thane of Cawdor, who has rebelled against Duncan, is deposed and executed for his treachery.

And King Duncan said, there's no art to find the mind's construction in the face. He was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust. Duncan trusted the Thane of Cawdor.

The Thane of Cawdor looked good, and he turned out to be a rotter. And ironically, just at this moment, Macbeth enters, and Duncan greets him warmly and effusively.

[8 : 44] In other words, he greets a man who is going to betray him even worse than the Thane of Cawdor did. That's all that got to do with 2 Samuel 14. 2 Samuel 14 is about appearance and reality.

It's about people not being what they seem to be. It's about deceit. It's about manipulation. Now, if you were here last week, 2 Samuel 13, the sin is blatant and dreadful.

Murder, rape, lust, all the chapters in absolute mess. Here in chapter 14, sin is much more devious. Sin is much more subtle and glamorous.

This is a chapter about deception. That's why I'm calling it about appearance and reality. See, probably, we read this story. Well, that's a straightforward enough story.

Probably, as we were reading it, your hearts were not filled with wonder, love, and praise. They were not strangely warmed the way Wesley's heart was strangely warmed. And yet, this story is powerful.

[9 : 52] Because when we look at this story, when we look at the story of Joab, a wise woman of Teko and Absalom, they all talk and behave as if they were sincere.

Not they're anything but. You see, we are still in the big story of Genesis 3.15. The descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent.

Now, back in chapters 11, 12, and 13, the destructive serpent is working blatantly and obviously. But here, the serpent is the deceiver rather than the destroyer.

Now, Paul, in 2 Corinthians 11, speaks of Satan disguising himself as an angel of light. And using Paul's opponents in that letter, false apostles, deceitful workmen.

And that's what's happening here. It's interesting. Earlier in the letter, in 2 Corinthians 2.11, it's talking about Satan. He says, we are not ignorant of his devices.

[10 : 59] This is a chapter teaching us not to be ignorant of the arch deceiver's devices. Because it's a vivid story. Not just about human deviousness and deceit.

This is an expose of the arch deceiver. We must be alert. We must have a true grounding in the Bible. An openness to the wisdom of God.

And humility. For we so easily slip into this kind of behavior ourselves, don't we? We are not only manipulated by others.

We manipulate ourselves, don't we? We must be people, as Christians, who are open. What you see is what you get. With all its rough edges.

You know, one of the reasons why so much of church life is so artificial, because so often we don't say what we really mean. We say what we think people want us to say.

[11 : 55] We develop a kind of super spirituality and try to be more pious than we are. We'll come back to that. Now, as this story develops, there are three parts to it.

And the first part, verses 1 to 20, worldly wisdom often looks like God's wisdom. That's why it's so deceptive.

Worldly wisdom often looks like God's wisdom. The arch manipulator, Mr. Fixit, Joab, the son of Zeruiah, David's general, is at work.

And he digs up this wise woman of Tekoa near Bethlehem. And it centers around Joab's desire to bring back Absalom.

There's no reason given for this. I suspect it's because Joab didn't like Absalom out of his sight. So he could keep an eye on him. And ironically, it's going to be Joab who kills Absalom a few chapters later.

[12 : 56] This is Absalom manipulating events. Now, this wise woman, remember there's a worldly wisdom. We talked about this last week. The letter of James speaks about the wisdom that is from below, that is devious, that is devilish.

Joab clearly intends to deceive David. And what he says he is doing is a cloak for what he's really doing. Remember, it's what people do. It's not what they say they are doing that matters.

That's so important. This is a story about deception. First of all, we have deceptive appearance. Verses 2 and 3.

Pretend to be a mourner. Put on mourning garments. Do not anoint yourself with oil. But behave like a woman who has been mourning many years for many days for the dead.

This is not admirable, after all. Pretending to be mourning. Pretending to be in a state of shock. And to deceptive appearance is added deceptive words.

[13 : 58] Go to the king and speak thus to him. So Joab put words into her mouth. So you see how the manipulation is working. Disguise yourself. And don't just disguise yourself.

Say what I tell you to say. And notice, secondly, she tells a story to persuade David. Now we've been reading the story. We'll remember, of course, this is the second time in three chapters that David has been told a story.

Remember, Nathan came to David. And it was that story that put David back on the path of repentance. The path of godliness. This is a very different kind of story.

This is a deceptive story. Once again, it's a deliberate parallel with David's own situation. Absalom has killed Ammon.

But Absalom did this deliberately. Here, you'll notice the vagueness of this story, the woman says. Verse 5. Alas, I'm a widow. My husband is dead. And your servant had two sons.

[14 : 59] And they quarreled with another in the field. There was no one to separate them. And one struck the other and killed him. This could have been manslaughter. Not even outright murder. The stories are not parallel.

David's story and this story. Absalom's murderous behavior was deliberate. This could, I say, be manslaughter.

You know, this is another thing that so often happens in deception. She uses flattery. Verse 17. The king, my lord the king, is like the angel of God to discern good and evil.

Now, that is extremely flattering. If somebody said that to you, you'd be very flattered indeed. Because we all love flattery, don't we? That's part of our fallen human nature.

Part of the idolatry that we were singing about in Psalm 115. Now, it's interesting. This isn't the first time this has been said to David. Back in 1 Samuel 29, verse 9, the Philistine king Achish, the king of Gath, said this to David.

[16 : 06] Now, you mean to smell a rat here. David is a wise man. David is essentially a good man, although flawed. But this kind of flattery coming from a Philistine, coming from a woman who appears to be wise, but is actually manipulative, this is beginning to sound like sharp practice, isn't it?

So, you'll see deception, the deception of worldly wisdom that looks like God's wisdom. But, we'll not get the point of this story unless we see that God is still working in his wisdom behind the scenes.

While this worldly wisdom is going on, two things show that God is at work as well. Look at verse 14. Yes.

Verse 14. We must all die. We are like water spilled on the ground which cannot be gathered up again, but God will not take away life. He devises means so that his banished one will not remain an outcast.

Now, you see what the woman is doing? She's manipulating, saying, David, if you don't bring back Absalom, you are not truly living in the compassion and love of God.

[17 : 24] It's a cheap jibe. But, cheap jibe or not, that phrase encapsulates the gospel of grace. God has devised a means so that his banished are not expelled from him.

God has provided a way back. We saw this morning in the story of Jacob. God is always, through human deviousness, through human deception, God is still working behind the scenes.

There is a way by which his banished will not be expelled and will not remain an outcast. So, the cheap jibe conceals the gospel of grace.

We've got to look for this in these stories. Where is God working? And then in verse 18. Verse 18. The king answered the woman, do not hide from me anything I ask you.

And the woman said, let my lord the king speak. The king said, is the hand of Joab with you in all this? David hasn't lost it. David hasn't lost the plot, as we might feel he had.

[18 : 32] He recognizes the double deception. The deceptive appearance, the deceptive words of the woman. Behind that, the arch manipulator himself. Joab.

And behind Joab, of course, the arch deceiver himself. So, you see what's happening. No deviousness of Joab and this woman or anyone else can actually block the gospel of God's grace.

I mean, I think that's absolutely wonderful. I mean, when I was studying this, I thought, you know, many, many years ago, when I was young, I used to hear gospel messages torn out of context.

This verse was often preached on. I never knew until I started studying 2 Samuel series of the context of this. Now, people were wrong in tearing it out of the context.

As Cornhill guys will tell, you must not tear passages out of context. Nevertheless, the instinct was right because there is gospel grace here. God has advised that there is a way by which the banished can return.

[19 : 40] There is a way by which the outcast can be given a home. That's the first type of deception. The first appearance, which does not correspond to reality. Worldly wisdom often looks like God's wisdom.

The second thing is worldly policy often looks like good guidance. Indeed, it often looks like providence. Verses 21 to 24 and then verses 28 to 33.

Worldly policy often looks like good guidance. In other words, things are happening. They seem to be going well and therefore we think this must be the case. There is no alternative, say people.

Now, many a person has tried to get their own way by saying their course of action is the Lord's will. That's what Job is doing here. Job, like Saul before him and like Absalom, as we'll see later, is very fond of the language of piety.

Verse 21. Verse 22. Job fell on his face to the ground and paid homage and blessed the king. Well, as he recognized David as God's king, he blessed him.

[20 : 55] Use the language. Use the language of covenant. And how often do people disguise their real motives under the guise of the language of Zion? So often this is used to manipulate and to pretend something different.

Let's talk like human beings. Let's not use the jargon and words which are meant to make us look more spiritual than we are. Look at how the word fellowship is often diluted into meaning a cup of tea.

Let's fellowship together. It means let's have a cup of coffee. Well, that's fair enough. A very, very good thing. But we don't need to give it a kind of religious or spiritual sanction. Let's avoid humbug.

I think one of the worst examples I heard of this was a young man was going out with a girl. He was very keen on her. Then one day he received a letter saying, I'm sorry, I don't want to go out with you any longer.

I don't believe the Lord means us to be together. Added to this, I'm going out with someone else. Why couldn't she just have been honest and said, I don't fancy you any longer?

[22 : 04] Why did it have to be this pious humbug? Why didn't it have to be this pious humbug? We really need to get rid of that from our speech. It doesn't glorify God and it doesn't lead to true understanding among people.

So, the language of piety is used here to make this seem a religious sanction. You've all been to the kind of Bible study, haven't you, where somebody said, I believe what the Lord is teaching us from the passage is this.

Doesn't that kill the Bible study stone dead? If the Lord is really teaching that, we shut our Bibles, go away and do it. That's show off the device. Somebody without any preparation comes and says, I've got the message of the Lord and you've got to listen to it.

The language of piety. Absalom's rise seems inevitable. Verse 28, he lived two full years in Jerusalem. Plenty of time to build up support, as we'll see next week.

That's what I meant when I said worldly policy often looks like providence, like good guidance. It seemed entrenched. Joab is pulling the strings.

[23 : 15] Absalom is playing his part. So often this happens in church, doesn't it? Commissions, committees, red tape. A kind of ecclesiastical terrorism.

We're made to feel that we cannot do anything other than what the official line is. That's what's happening here. What is, whatever is, is right.

As the poet Alexander Pope said in one of his poems. And this is not helped really by verse 33, the so-called reconciliation.

There's no godly repentance on Absalom's part. If you want to find a genuine story of reconciliation in the Old Testament, go back to Genesis 45, the story of Joseph and his brothers.

As they weep, as they open their hearts, and as all the hurt and all the pain comes out. This isn't happening here. There's no sense things need to be put right.

[24 : 20] And that so often happens in our lives. Things which appear to work are inevitable, we think. Nothing can change. And the doctrine of providence becomes the doctrine of fatalism, doesn't it?

And it is true, often insincere and ill-disposed people seem to get away with it. Their lives flourish. Their jobs are successful. Their families are beautiful.

Everything goes well. And very often, nothing very obviously happens to change that. So we need to read Psalm 73. That's what the psalmist wrestles with there.

Until, he says, I went into the century of God. Then I discerned their end. We need to see everything in the perspective of eternity.

Not does this look good. Not is this inevitable. But is this godly? Will it last into eternity? We must get away from the shifting shadows of the night, as we're going to be singing about shortly.

[25 : 25] And walk in the light, as John says. The light that throws its illumination into all the dark corners. So you see how this chapter is working.

Insincere people pretending to be worldly wise. Insincere people trying to entrench their policies. And finally, come back to the verses you thought I had forgotten.

Worldly leadership often looks attractive. Verses 25 to 27. In many ways, it's difficult to see why these verses are there. Because you could read straight on from verse 24.

So Absalom lived apart in his own house and did not come into the king's presence. Verse 28. So Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem without coming into the king's presence.

But this passage is put here so that we can see what the whole passage is about. In case we're lulled into a false sense of security.

[26 : 27] In case, while Joab is really rather wise, Absalom's behaved himself since he came back. This wise woman really had clever things to say. Warning bells are ringing here.

Worldly leadership often looks attractive. That is the point. Come back to 2 Corinthians again, which I mentioned earlier. What was the problem there?

The super apostles who looked attractive, who spoke well. No doubt nowadays they'd have their blogs, their websites, and all their money rolling in, and so on.

Over against them was Saul of Tarsus. A rather unattractive looking man, probably. And he says he's not a good speaker, although I think that's all being modest.

Difficult to read 1 and 2 Corinthians without seeing the power of eloquence. And so what he's meaning is he's not using the fancy tricks of the rhetoricians of the day.

[27 : 30] So what's happening here then? First of all, it's a reminder of earlier bad leadership candidates in the story. Twice in the story of 1 and 2 Samuel.

We've seen this before. Stories put in the bigger narrative. 1 Samuel 9 verse 2. Not a man among the people of Israel was more handsome than he.

It was that he that was King Saul. All his disastrous reign, and so on. And then again, in 1 Samuel 16. Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature.

Because I have rejected him. That's Eliab, David's elder brother. It doesn't, of course, mean that physical attraction disqualifies. David himself was a handsome man.

What it means is that if the main qualification is physical attractiveness, if the main qualification is essentially worldly appearance and worldly wisdom, that's heading for disaster.

[28 : 32] A reminder, bad leadership candidates. You'll notice too, his pride is his downfall. This phrase. So often in narrative, you get these details that seem to be just padding.

Verse 26. Cut the hair of his head. Every year he used to cut it. When it was heavy on him, he cut it. Not a problem I have. And he weighed the hair of his head, 200 shekels, by the king's weight.

If you read on to chapter 18, you'll discover it was his hair which trapped him. His pride brought him low. And notice he's got a family to carry on his interests.

They were born to Absalom three sons and one daughter whose name was Tamar. We can't, of course, forget Tamar's aunt who was so dreadfully violated by Amnon in the previous chapter.

She was a beautiful woman. Reminder of chapter 13. Worldly leadership often looks attractive. Worldly leadership is very seductive.

[29 : 33] And, of course, in our world of image, of soundbite, of spindox, we're so familiar with that, both in church and state. Appearance and reality.

Worldly wisdom masquerading as God's wisdom. Worldly policy masquerading as providence and guidance. And worldly leadership masquerading as godly leadership.

Two points as we finish. One, God is working behind the scenes. Wonderful phrase in Proverbs. I forgot to note down where it was in Proverbs, so I can't remember.

But it says this. No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord. Isn't that what's happening here?

Their wisdom, understanding and counsel are taking on the Lord of hosts. And they're found wanting. They're not taking on David. You see, part of the issue here is that Joab and Absalom think David is finished.

[30 : 38] They think he's lost the plot. They think they can manipulate him any way they want. The trouble is, they are trying to manipulate the Lord of hosts. No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord.

When we're battling with commissions, assemblies, presbyteries, general assemblies, remember that as well. It's a great encouragement. It's also a warning.

It's a warning to us not to engage in this shadowy world of manipulation. And secondly, the need of integrity in our own hearts.

Once again, coming back to 2 Corinthians, listen to these words of Paul. Therefore, having this ministry, by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

But we have renounced disgraceful and deceitful ways. Brothers and sisters, let's turn our hearts away from the shifting shadows of the night and walk in the light as he is in the light.

[31 : 49] Amen. Let's pray. Father, in our own hearts, we recognize the seeds of all these manipulative and devious ways.

Help us indeed, like the apostle, to renounce disgraceful and underhand ways. As the other apostle says, help us indeed to walk in the light as he is in the light.

We ask this in the strong name of him who is the light of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.