

Weak Fathers

A surprising number of Bible heroes were weak and pathetic fathers. Why? There are lessons to be learned here, if we want to avoid the same mistakes they made.

“But when David heard of all these things, he was very angry”
(2 Sam. 13:21)

“So Joab arose and went to Geshur, and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. And the king said, ‘Let him return to his own house, but do not let him see my face.’ So Absalom returned to his own house, but did not see the king’s face” (2 Sam. 14:23-24).



In the chaos that followed his scandal with Bathsheba, we are given a glimpse into David’s role as a father. It’s an ugly story. One of his sons raped a stepsister, a crime which made David “very angry”—but his anger was not followed up by any meaningful discipline. When another son, Absalom, avenged the wrong by murdering the perp, David again reacted passively, banishing Absalom from his presence. “Out of sight, out of mind” seemed to be his way of dealing with the problem. It took some aggressive diplomacy on the part of Absalom and Joab to force David to step up to his responsibilities as a dad.

Overall, David was a bold and decisive king whose strong leadership turned Israel into a regional power. But at home, he was a weak and timid father, incapable of exercising firm control. He seemed not to have a clue how to lead his family.

David is not the only Bible hero who fits that mold. Jacob, Samuel, and Hezekiah were also strong men of faith who accomplished great things for God in their broader presence on history’s stage, but who, in their domestic lives, were lousy fathers, raising sons who turned out to be despicable characters. For these men, career success did not translate into family success.

Leadership in business, politics, or the military requires skills that can be learned through formal training or mentoring. But fatherhood is a challenge that requires a skill set entirely different from anything else a man may do in his life. A man cannot be successful as a father unless he recognizes the unique nature of the task he has signed up for in that role.

For example, in raising kids *the motivation techniques are different*. In the workplace a man deals with other adults who respond to financial and/or social incentives. Children do not care about such concerns. A father must be able to “read” his children’s minds and step into their world to understand how to direct them.

Likewise, *methods of teaching and mentoring are different*. Children have limited intellectual capacities, and must be taught as children, not miniature adults. Here, too, a man must learn how to shift gears and adapt his teaching style to their needs.

Furthermore, *discipline is different*. Children respond to a delicate balance of firmness and love in being corrected. Tip the scales too far in either direction, and the discipline becomes counterproductive, even destructive. A father must learn to strike that balance.

Finally, and most importantly, *the long-term objective is different*. In his job, the outcome of a man’s work is measured by quarterly earnings, process improvements, or battlefield victories. But how do you measure success in the raising of children? The primary objective here is *character development*. Fathers who see their job as nothing more than keeping their kids happy will fail miserably.

David, Jacob, Samuel, and Hezekiah were not losers. Like all of us, they were complex individuals whose performance was a mix of good and bad. But their glaring failures as fathers should serve as a warning to all men today to take their role as dads seriously. Study the examples of these Bible characters. Seek the counsel of older men. Listen to the wisdom of your wife. You have one chance to do this right. Don’t blow it.

— David King