



Please turn to 2 Samuel 18 (page 251, pew Bible). For the last few weeks we have been watching the unfolding drama of Absalom's revolt against his father, King David. By the looks of everything, Absalom has the advantage. He has stolen the hearts of the men of Israel, declared himself king, and advanced on the capital city of Jerusalem, while David has been on the run with the rest of his household – hungry, exhausted, and discouraged.

Nevertheless, David has some loyal friends who have not forsaken him, such as Ittai the Gittite and the six hundred soldiers under his charge, along with their wives and children. There are the Cherethites and Pelethites, who make up David's royal guard. Other friends have also met up with David. But he has sent them back to Jerusalem where they could be of better help to him by pretending to support Absalom while gaining information and reporting back to David. These friends include Zadok and Abiathar the priests, plus Zadok's sons Ahimaaz and Jonathan. Hushai, who is referred to as "David's friend," has also been sent back to Jerusalem by the king to defeat the counsel of Ahithophel, who has betrayed David and gone over to Absalom.

In chapter 17, Ahithophel comes up with a great attack plan that involves killing David while he is "weary and discouraged" (17:2) and still within striking distance. Ahithophel will lead this campaign with a contingent of 12,000 soldiers while Absalom remains safe back in Jerusalem. This surprise attack on David will throw everyone with him into a panic. They'll scatter like cockroaches, leaving David exposed. Ahithophel will then kill only the king and bring all the people back to Absalom as a bride comes home to her husband.

Ahithophel's plan sounds good to Absalom and all the men of Israel. But Absalom then seeks a second opinion from Hushai, who appears to support Absalom but is really there to save David. So, to buy David some more time, Hushai says, "This time the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good" (17:7). Hushai then appeals to Absalom's pride by suggesting that he lead the charge – not just with 12,000 soldiers but with "an army as numerous as the sand on the seashore" (17:11). Picturing such a scene enralls Absalom, who decides along with all his men that Hushai's counsel is better than Ahithophel's – even though it wasn't at all from a strategic standpoint. But 2 Samuel 17:14 tells us why Absalom and his men changed their mind and decided to go with Hushai's advice:

For the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring harm upon Absalom.

- 2 Samuel 17:14

From this point on, things are set in motion that eventually lead to David's deliverance and Absalom's downfall. Hushai gets word to Zadok and Abiathar what's happening, and they send word to Ahimaaz and Jonathan, who are to run and inform David. A young man sees them and informs Absalom, who sends his servants to capture them. But a woman hides Ahimaaz and Jonathan in her well, and their pursuers are unable to find them. So, Ahimaaz

and Jonathan succeed in getting word to David, who crosses the Jordan under the cover of night. So does everyone with him. In the meantime, Ahithophel finds out that his counsel was not followed, so he goes home and hangs himself. No doubt he figured that Absalom's conspiracy would fail and they'll be executed as traitors anyway. So, why put off the inevitable?

This brings us to the last part of chapter 17. Verse 24 says, "Then David came to Mahanaim. And Absalom crossed the Jordan with all the men of Israel." Mahanaim is a stronghold that's located 30 miles east of the Jordan River. The name Mahanaim means "two camps," which is ironic considering the conflict that's about to take place.

As Absalom gets ready to attack, the Lord continues to look after David and those with him. Picking up the account in verse 25 we read, "Now Absalom had set Amasa over the army instead of Joab. Amasa was the son of a man named Ithra the Ishmaelite, who had married Abigail the daughter of Nahash, sister of Zeruiah, Joab's mother. Zeruiah is David's sister, which means that Joab is David's nephew, as is Amasa – which means that Joab and Absalom and Amasa are all cousins. Talk about a dysfunctional family! But I digress. Continuing on to verses 26-29 we read,

²⁶ And Israel and Absalom encamped in the land of Gilead.

²⁷ When David came to Mahanaim, Shobi the son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Ammonites, and Machir the son of Ammiel from Lo-debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim, ²⁸ brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, flour, parched grain, beans and lentils, ²⁹ honey and curds and sheep and cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat, for they said, "The people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness."

- 2 Samuel 17:25-29

The Lord continues to sustain David with the help of wealthy foreign friends: Shobi, the brother of Hanun, king of Ammon, who might've been reigning in place of his brother (10:2); Machir, who gave shelter to Mephibosheth (9:4); and Barzillai, a "very wealthy man" (19:32), who later accompanied David part of the way back to Jerusalem. So, King David has been rejected by his own people but received by Gentiles. Sound familiar? (See John 1:11-12.)

All this sets the stage for the bittersweet victory that occurs in chapter 18.

A BITTERSWEET VICTORY

2 Samuel 18

The other day I read an article titled, "How to Write a War Film: The ULTIMATE Guide."¹ The writers of the article state that "the greatest advantage of war films ... is inherent drama. There isn't anything more dramatic in life than war. A great war film will channel this drama but also include idiosyncratic [peculiar] elements"² – like how they begin the movie, how they draw you in from the very get-go. One approach is to "generat[e] tension early on."³

¹ "How to Write a War Film: The ULTIMATE Guide," *Industrial Scripts*, 27 August 2020 [online]. Retrieved on 12 July 2023 from <https://industrialscripts.com/war-film/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Tension (vv. 1-4)

That's what the narrator does at the outset of 2 Samuel 18. We sense not only the mounting tension as the troops prepare for battle, but also the *inward* tension David feels, even as he instructs his troops. Justice demands that the conspiracy be squashed, but David can't bear the thought of harming his own son.

¹ Then David mustered the men who were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. ² And David sent out the army, one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the command of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the men, "I myself will also go out with you." ³ But the men said, "You shall not go out. For if we flee, they will not care about us. If half of us die, they will not care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us. Therefore it is better that you send us help from the city." ⁴ The king said to them, "Whatever seems best to you I will do." So the king stood at the side of the gate, while all the army marched out by hundreds and by thousands. ⁵ And the king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders about Absalom.

- 2 Samuel 18:1-4

On one hand we see strong military leadership on the part of David, as noted by the action verbs: He **musters** his men ... he **sets** commanders over them ... he **sends** them out in three main divisions under three well-known commanders: Joab, Abishai, and Gittai, with Joab being the senior commander. David **says** to the men, "I myself will also go out with you." He's not going to send them anywhere that he is not willing to go himself. But his men insist otherwise, saying to David, "You are worth ten thousand of us." They tell David to support them from the city – perhaps by sending auxiliary troops as needed. And David **listens** to his men – another mark of a good leader. The king then **stands** by the gate while the army marches out, encouraging them by his presence.

All good qualities of a strong leader. But verse 5 takes on a different tone as David orders his top commanders: "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." David is speaking as the king, but his words are that of a father.⁴ As king, David is to administer justice (8:15). Absalom is a rebel, traitor, and murderer who deserves to die. That would be justice. But Absalom is also the son of a father who loves him, and love demands gentleness, not because Absalom deserves gentleness, but "for the sake of" the father who loved him, who always saw him as "the young man Absalom" (v. 5; see also 14:21; 18:29, 32).⁵ Everyone heard what the king said and no doubt wondered how all of this was going to turn out.

⁴ John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel: Your Kingdom Come*, Preaching the Word, series editor R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 441.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Triumph (vv. 6-18)

⁶ So the army went out into the field against Israel, and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. ⁷ And the men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the loss there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. ⁸ The battle spread over the face of all the country, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword.

- 2 Samuel 18:6-8

Verses 6-8 provide a brief summary of the battle. The good guys won. Despite being hugely outnumbered, David's army crushed the resistance led by Absalom. But what claimed the most lives was not the fighters, but the forest – “a thickly wooded region of rough terrain, with ravines, marshes, cliffs,” and other natural dangers.⁶ The forest would have given David's army a huge advantage, as they would have been experienced in guerilla warfare. “The war to determine who will be king in Jerusalem takes only one battle on a single day (18:6-8).”⁷ The whole battle is summarized in a few sentences.

Far more space is devoted to describing the death of Absalom, who had led this revolt against his father. Remember, “the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so *that* the LORD might bring harm upon Absalom” (7:14, italics mine). And he did. Absalom's gruesome death is described in verses 9-15. dies a gruesome death.

⁹ And Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak, and his head caught fast in the oak, and he was suspended between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on.¹⁰ And a certain man saw it and told Joab, “Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak.” ¹¹ Joab said to the man who told him, “What, you saw him! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have been glad to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt.” ¹² But the man said to Joab, “Even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I would not reach out my hand against the king's son, for in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, ‘For my sake protect the young man Absalom.’” ¹³ On the other hand, if I had dealt treacherously against his life (and there is nothing hidden from the king), then you yourself would have stood aloof.” ¹⁴ Joab said, “I will not waste time like this with you.” And he took three javelins in his hand and thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the oak. ¹⁵ And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him.

- 2 Samuel 18:9-15

Yikes. What a terrible way to go. Verse 9 says, “Absalom happened to meet the servants of David.” But that doesn't mean it was a coincidence, it simply means it occurred. Far from happening by chance, this encounter took place because God had ordained it (17:14).

⁶ Ibid., 442.

⁷ Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*. The NIV Application Commentary, gen. ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2003), 593.

Absalom was riding on his mule, the mode of transportation for kings, which Absalom had declared himself to be. While riding – perhaps fleeing from his pursuers – his hair got caught in the branches of a tree. Absalom’s beautiful hair, the hair that he would cut and weigh and publish the results, the hair he was so proud of – a symbol of his conceit – played a role in his destruction. It got caught in “the thick branches of a great oak” (v. 9) – literally, “the great oak,” which indicates that the tree became well-known because of this incident. Absalom got stuck, but the mule beneath him went on, leaving Absalom dangling in mid-air. Picture the scene, for it not only shows Absalom’s vulnerability, but it also symbolizes the kingdom being taken from him. Mules are for kings. Absalom thinks he’s a king, but he’s not. His father David is the real king, the one anointed by God, and God intends to keep it that way. Absalom is exposed and is about to be executed.

***The preserving of God’s kingdom
involves the perishing of its enemies.***

David understood this – except when it came to his son Absalom. He wanted him to be treated *gently* instead of *justly*. As one commentator put it, “David would treat cancer with candy. Joab knew it required surgery – and he nominated himself as surgeon.”⁸

So, when one of Joab’s soldiers says, “I saw Absalom hanging in an oak,” Joab says, “You saw? Why didn’t you strike him to the ground? I would have given you a thousand pieces of silver and a hero’s belt.” The soldier replies, “I wouldn’t have killed the king’s son for 10,000 pieces of silver! We all heard what the king said, and he would’ve found out who did it – and you would’ve just stood by and let me suffer the consequences.” Joab says, “I’m not wasting my time with you.” That’s the best response he can give, because he knows the soldier is right! You see, Joab couldn’t care less about people. But he is zealous about the kingdom, and he does what it takes to get a job done. So, he thrusts into Absalom’s heart three javelins, which may symbolize the three divisions of David’s army – Joab’s way of saying, “This is for all of us!” Then Absalom becomes a human pinada that Joab’s ten armor-bearers beat until he dies.

¹⁶ Then Joab blew the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained them. ¹⁷ And they took Absalom and threw him into a great pit in the forest and raised over him a very great heap of stones. And all Israel fled every one to his own home. ¹⁸ Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself the pillar that is in the King's Valley, for he said, “I have no son to keep my name in remembrance.” He called the pillar after his own name, and it is called Absalom's monument to this day.

- 2 Samuel 18:16-18

Because Joab was concerned about the kingdom, he keeps the casualties to a minimum by calling off the army in its pursuit of Israel. They make a hasty grave for Absalom – one fit not for a king but for a criminal, like Achan back in Joshua’s day who was buried the same way (Josh. 7:26), as was the king of Ai, who was an enemy of Israel (Josh. 8:29). Absalom was both the king’s enemy and a criminal.

⁸ Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1999, reprinted 2018), 230.

Absalom's grave stands in contrast to the monument he had set up for himself during his lifetime, so that he would be remembered, since he didn't have any sons. Now, back in chapter 14 (v. 27), the narrator mentioned that Absalom did have three sons. But their names are not mentioned, which may indicate that they died young. Whatever the case, Absalom wanted to be sure to be remembered.

What's ironic is that, typically, truly great men and women aren't usually obsessed with how history will remember them. They are remembered precisely because they were not self-absorbed.⁹ This is particularly true of great Christian men and women. Just a few weeks ago in our adult Truth Tracks class in the missions documentary on India, we were reminded of the epitaph that William Carey, "the father of modern missions," requested for his gravestone:



"A wretched, poor and helpless worm, on Thy kind arms I fall." Scripture clearly states, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:5-6; cf. Prov. 3:34). William Carey understood this. David understood this. Absalom never did, and he paid the price. *The preserving of God's kingdom involves the perishing of his enemies.*

⁹ Woodhouse, 446.

Joab had a deep sense of justice.... From [his] point of view, David's love for Absalom was a dangerous weakness.... Joab acted for the sake of David's kingdom, as he saw it. In the death of Absalom justice triumphed over love. If David had his way, love would have triumphed over justice.¹⁰

This takes us to the final portion of 2 Samuel 18, which ends on a terribly sad note.

Tears (vv. 19-33)

¹⁹ Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said, "Let me run and carry news to the king that the Lord has delivered him from the hand of his enemies." ²⁰ And Joab said to him, "You are not to carry news today. You may carry news another day, but today you shall carry no news, because the king's son is dead." ²¹ Then Joab said to the Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have seen." The Cushite bowed before Joab, and ran. ²² Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said again to Joab, "Come what may, let me also run after the Cushite." And Joab said, "Why will you run, my son, seeing that you will have no reward for the news?"²³ "Come what may," he said, "I will run." So he said to him, "Run." Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the plain, and outran the Cushite.

²⁴ Now David was sitting between the two gates, and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and when he lifted up his eyes and looked, he saw a man running alone. ²⁵ The watchman called out and told the king. And the king said, "If he is alone, there is news in his mouth." And he drew nearer and nearer. ²⁶ The watchman saw another man running. And the watchman called to the gate and said, "See, another man running alone!" The king said, "He also brings news." ²⁷ The watchman said, "I think the running of the first is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok." And the king said, "He is a good man and comes with good news."

²⁸ Then Ahimaaz cried out to the king, "All is well." And he bowed before the king with his face to the earth and said, "Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king."²⁹ And the king said, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent the king's servant, your servant, I saw a great commotion, but I do not know what it was." ³⁰ And the king said, "Turn aside and stand here." So he turned aside and stood still.

³¹ And behold, the Cushite came, and the Cushite said, "Good news for my lord the king! For the Lord has delivered you this day from the hand of all who rose up against you." ³² The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And the Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man." ³³ And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

- 2 Samuel 18:19-33

¹⁰ Ibid.

Some of you can relate to the grief that consumed David as he heard of his son's death. "David was unable to save Absalom from the consequences of his rebellion. ... Justice demanded one thing. David's helpless cry longed for something else."¹¹ This whole episode sets before us a problem that David's kingdom could not resolve – a problem that we are unable to resolve, and that is the tension between love and justice. We feel this tension in politics. We feel this tension in parenting. I feel this tension in pastoring.

This tension will never be resolved in this world. But there's a new world coming, where righteousness dwells and where love reigns without tension, without conflict, without heartache. And that's why we pray, "Your kingdom come."

The tension between love and justice was resolved at the cross of Christ, where justice and love, righteousness and peace, kissed each other (Psalm 85:10). David's helpless cry, "If only I had died instead of you," anticipated the very solution that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of David, would provide. He died, not as an enemy, but *for* his enemies. On the cross, Jesus was suspended between earth and heaven as he died, taking the punishment that we justly deserved, thereby satisfying God's justice against our sins. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God" (Rom. 5:8-9).

One final note: When Ahimaaz said to Joab, "'Let me run and carry news to the king that the Lord has delivered him from the hand of his enemies'" (2 Sam. 18:19), Ahimaaz is using *gospel language*. The New Testament equivalent of "carry news" is "preach the gospel." Isn't that what the good news of the gospel is all about, that through his death and resurrection for sinners, the Lord has delivered us from the hand of our enemies – from sin, Satan, and death? This is the assurance we have as believers in Christ. How can we keep this good news to ourselves? May we have the heart of Ahimaaz and say, "Let me run and carry [this good] news to [others]." "That is why the Scriptures say, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Romans 10:14-15 NLT, NIV).

¹¹ Ibid., 451.