

2 Samuel 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Samuel chapter 15 After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him. And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate.

And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, From what city are you? And when he said, Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel, Absalom would say to him, See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you.

Then Absalom would say, O that I would judge in the land, then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice. And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him.

Thus Absalom did to all Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel. And at the end of four years, Absalom said to the king, Please let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed to the Lord in Hebron.

For your servant vowed a vow, while I lived at Geshur in Aram, saying, If the Lord will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will offer worship to the Lord. The king said to him, Go in peace.

[1 : 09] So he arose and went to Hebron. But Absalom sent secret messengers throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then say, Absalom is king at Hebron.

With Absalom went two hundred men from Jerusalem who were invited guests, and they went in their innocence and knew nothing. And while Absalom was offering the sacrifices, he sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counsellor, from his city Gilo.

And the conspiracy grew strong, and the people with Absalom kept increasing. And a messenger came to David, saying, The hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom. Then David said to all his servants who were with him at Jerusalem, Arise, and let us flee, or else there will be no escape from Absalom.

Go quickly, lest he overtake us quickly, and bring down ruin on us, and strike the city with the edge of the sword. And the king's servants said to the king, Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever my lord the king decides.

So the king went out, and all his household after him. And the king left ten concubines to keep the house. And the king went out, and all the people after him, and they halted at the last house.

[2 : 15] And all his servants passed by him, and all the Cherethites, and all the Pelethites, and all the six hundred Gittites who had followed him from Gath passed on before the king. Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, Why do you also go with us?

Go back and stay with the king, for you are a foreigner and also an exile from your home. You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander about with us? Since I go I know not where?

Go back and take your brothers with you, and may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you. But Ittai answered the king, As the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king shall be, whether for death or for life, there also will your servant be.

And David said to Ittai, Go then, pass on. So Ittai the Gittite passed on with all his men, and all the little ones who were with him. And all the land wept aloud as all the people passed by.

And the king crossed the brook Kidron, and all the people passed on toward the wilderness. And Abiathar came up, and behold Zadok came also with all the Levites, bearing the ark of the covenant of God.

[3 : 20] And they set down the ark of God until the people had all passed out of the city. Then the king said to Zadok, Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favour in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back, and let me see both Ittai and his dwelling place.

But if he says, I have no pleasure in you, behold, here I am. Let him do to me what seems good to him. The king also said to Zadok the priest, Are you not a seer?

Go back to the city in peace with your two sons, Ahimeaz your son, and Jonathan the son of Abiathar. See, I will wait at the fords of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me. So Zadok and Abiathar carried the ark of God back to Jerusalem, and they remained there. But David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, barefoot and with his head covered.

And all the people who were with him covered their heads, and they went up, weeping as they went. And it was told David, Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom. And David said, O Lord, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness.

[4 : 23] While David was coming to the summit, where God was worshipped, behold, Hushai the archite came to meet him with his coat torn and dirt on his head. David said to him, If you go on with me, you will be a burden to me.

But if you return to the city and say to Absalom, I will be your servant, O king, as I have been your father's servant in time past, so now I will be your servant, then you will defeat for me the counsel of Ahithophel.

Are not Zadok and Abiathar the priest with you there? So whatever you hear from the king's house, tell it to Zadok and Abiathar the priests. Behold, their two sons are with them there, Ahimeaz, Zadok's son, and Jonathan, Abiathar's son.

And by them you shall send to me everything you hear. So Hushai, David's friend, came into the city, just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem. Ever since David's sin with Bathsheba, his power within the kingdom had been crumbling.

His moral authority was deeply compromised. His wisdom was failing him. People like Joab were gaining power in his administration, and there was violence and wickedness within his own house that he could not deal with.

[5 : 27] Now, in chapter 15, after his ineffectual attempts to deal with him, Absalom the crown prince stages a coup against his father. James Jordan suggests that Absalom functions as a foil for Solomon.

Both Solomon, whose name means peace, and Absalom, whose name means my father is peace, have peace as part of their name. Solomon is distinguished for his wisdom, Absalom for his cunning.

Much as the two descendants of Saul, Ish-bosheth and Mephibosheth, had names that played upon that same word for shame, so the two sons of David are set in juxtaposition with each other, with their names both having to do with peace.

Absalom might also remind us of David himself in various ways. His physical appearance is similar to that of David. He's beautiful, he is arrestingly handsome, and he steals the heart of the people. David was also noteworthy for his beautiful physical appearance, and over the period of chapters 16-18 of 1 Samuel, won over the hearts of the people, as Absalom does here.

[6 : 24] Absalom seduces the bride away from David the husband. Absalom begins his coup by developing a sort of retinue around him, a group of runners and servants that made him look like a king.

More particularly, Absalom takes on the characteristics of a king of the nations. We don't usually read of David travelling around with a chariot and horses. Absalom quite likely picked this up from his grandfather in Geshur when he stayed with him in Aram as a result of his exile.

Judgment was delivered in the gate of the city, and it seems that Absalom focuses upon people from the northern tribes, the tribes of Israel, those tribes that were formerly associated with Saul. There is a natural split within the nation, and when the nation is in a poor condition, it's along this fracture line that it will tend to divide.

Saul had very much privileged the tribe and people of Benjamin during his time in rule, and Absalom suggests that David is showing a similar sort of favouritism to Judah. People from Judah get heard by the king, but those from Israel aren't really cared for by the king.

They don't get justice in Jerusalem. And so any people coming down to Jerusalem from Israel to have their cases heard is discouraged before they are ever seen by David or one of his ministers. Absalom, however, plays the part of the flatterer.

[7 : 35] He shows great concern for their case and wishes that they could be heard. If only he were king, he would act on their behalf. In all of this, he's fostering grievances among the people in the

northern part of the kingdom against David, suggesting that he does not care for them or administer justice truly.

He's also, by his flattery, winning hearts and minds to his cause. As he acts this way over a period of years, it puts him in a position to stage a coup. We should again be alert to the way that David's sin with Bathsheba set off a chain of events that weakened his hold, weakened his administration, empowered unfaithful elements within it and weakened loyalties in others and compromised David's capacity for judgment and for moral authority.

In the preceding chapters, we saw David's indecision and how his inability to act in the case of Tamar and Amnon and in the case of Absalom gave power to others to force actions upon him or to act in his place.

Here, the absence of a strong, just authority leads to a power vacuum that will be filled by people like Joab and Absalom. And Absalom is all too happy to exploit the weaknesses of David's kingdom at this point.

At the end of either four or forty years, Absalom addresses the king. If it is forty, forty seems to be the original reading, then it might be a reference to the years of David's reign.

[8 : 54] David reigns for forty years, so Absalom's coup might occur in the final year of his reign. If it's four years, which would be the easier reading, Absalom has had a considerable amount of time to strengthen and create grievances, and is now in a strong position to actually pull off his coup.

There are similarities to be noted here with the vengeance that he enacted against Amnon back in chapter 13. He stages a special feast, invites many royal officials, and then performs the deed. This is all after many years of cunningly biding his time, two years in the case of Amnon, and likely four years here. He goes down to Hebron, to the south, under the pretense of holding a peace offering, a feast and fulfilment of a vow given for deliverance.

He invites two hundred top men from David's administration. They will either join him, or they will serve as helpful hostages. At this point, Absalom has David in a pincer movement.

Israel to the north have had their hearts estranged from David, and will join Absalom, and to the south there is Hebron. And for all David knows, the two hundred men have thrown their lot in with Absalom.

[9 : 57] He has to flee to the east, out into the wilderness. Absalom and his men are based in Hebron, in the south of Judah, where David's rule over Judah first began. Ahithophel, most significantly, joins Absalom.

He is Bathsheba's grandfather, and perhaps, even though Bathsheba has now married David, Ahithophel is angry with David on account of his taking of his granddaughter, and his killing his grandson-in-law.

David and his men leave Jerusalem, and he leaves ten concubines to guard the palace. While they would not physically guard the place, they would be a remnant of David's house left there. David is accompanied by the Cherethites and the Pelethites, the bodyguard of the king, also with six hundred men from Gath, either Gittites who had joined him during his period there, or the original military force that had been with him from the beginning.

Ittai is a convert from Philistia, a Gittite, who has associated himself with David. The vow of loyalty that Ittai gives to David at this point is reminiscent of the vow that David's great-grandmother, Ruth, gave to Naomi back in the book of Ruth.

David and his men cross the brook Kidron, which is between Mount Zion and the Mount of Olives, and Zadok comes bringing the Ark of the Covenant, also Abiathar. These are two men functioning as high priests at the time, and the Ark is going to go with the true king.

[11 : 14] Yet the Ark belongs back in the city, and David here goes into exile while sending the Ark back to the city. The description of setting down the Ark until all the people have passed by might remind us of the entry into the land back in the book of Joshua, as they cross the Jordan.

This is a sort of inverse of that. They are now leaving the land. David goes up the Ascent of Olives, the Mount of Olives, in a state of mourning with his men. They're weeping and with bare feet.

He hears that Ahithophel is among the conspirators, and he prays that Ahithophel's council would be made into foolishness. There is an immediate answer to David's prayer as Hushai the Archite arrives to join him.

Hushai, the king's friend and counsellor, will be a means by which Ahithophel's council can be thwarted. He will go back to the city, present himself as loyal to Absalom, and seek to undermine

the council of Ahithophel.

There will be a number of men who are faithful to David left in the city. The priests, Zadok and Abiathar, and their two sons, and Hushai, the king's friend and counsellor, will all be there to act for David and spy on Absalom.

[12:17] A question to consider, in what ways does David's retreat from Jerusalem anticipate the story of Christ and his cross?