

2 Samuel 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Samuel chapter 18 Then David mustered the men who were with him, and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. 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. 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. 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.

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.

So the army went out into the field against Israel, and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. 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.

[1 : 12] The battle spread over the face of all the country, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword. 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. And a certain man saw it and told Joab, Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak.

Joab said to the men 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. 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.

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. 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. And ten young men, Joab's armour bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him.

[2 : 29] Then Joab blew the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained them. 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. 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. Then Ahimeaz, 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.

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. Then Joab said to the Cushite, Go, tell the king what you have seen.

The Cushite bowed before Joab and ran. Then Ahimeaz, 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?

[3 : 37] Come what may, he said, I will run. So he said to him, Run. Then Ahimeaz ran by the way of the plain, and out ran the Cushite. 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. 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. 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.

The watchman said, I think the running of the first is like the running of Ahimeaz, the son of Zadok. And the king said, He is a good man and comes with good news. Then Ahimeaz 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. And the king said, Is it well with the young man Absalom?

[4 : 41] Ahimeaz answered, When Joab sent the king's servant your servant, I saw a great commotion, but I do not know what it was. And the king said, Turn aside and stand here.

So he turned aside and stood still. 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.

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.

And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom, would I have died instead of you, oh Absalom, my son, my son.

In chapter 17, the lord had used Hushite the Archite to frustrate the council of Ahithophel, who then went out and killed himself. Now in chapter 18, while Absalom and his men play out the council of Hushite, an overwhelming attack with men mustered from all over Israel, covering the face of the earth, David and his men adopt tactics similar to those suggested by Ahithophel, a more strategic strike that separates the leader from his men.

[5 : 57] Ahithophel's council had sought to isolate David and by killing him to destroy his cause. However, this is exactly what happens to Absalom. David divided his forces into three, much as Gideon's forces were divided back in Judges chapter 7 verse 16 and Saul's in 1 Samuel chapter 11 verse 11.

Hushite's council to Absalom, that he muster a force from the entirety of Israel, had been designed to buy David's significant time. It would take quite some time to gather people from Dan to Beersheba and to bring them all together over the Jordan to attack David.

While Ahithophel had sought to pursue David immediately and without delay with men that were already gathered, destroying him while he was exhausted, disheartened and in a position of greater vulnerability, Hushite's plan gave David the time to cross the Jordan, to receive relief and support from Transjordanian allies, to muster a much larger fighting force and to find greater defensive security in some fortified city.

Ahithophel's plan had been to divide David from the men and to pick him off, bringing an end to the war. And so recognising this danger, David's men did not want him to accompany them into the battle, lest he be killed and everything come to nothing.

However, by Hushite's false counsel, Absalom leads his men into battle and puts himself into a position of considerably greater vulnerability, which he would not have been in had he followed Ahithophel's advice.

[7 : 18] This makes it possible to overcome Absalom's coup with one effective blow. David had given explicit instructions concerning the life of one man in the battle, that of his son Absalom.

Joab, Abishai and Ittai the Gittite, the commanders of the three parts of David's army, were all instructed concerning Absalom in the hearing of the wider people. Earlier, of course, David had given instructions concerning the life of Uriah to Joab, desiring Joab to ensure that Uriah's life was taken.

Now he requests mercy from Joab to ensure that the life of his son is not taken. The battle itself was fought in the forest of Ephraim, between the men of Israel, presumably largely the people from the northern tribes, and the men of David, chiefly men of Judah and allies from the Transjordan, both Gentiles and Israelites.

20,000 men were killed and as in several other biblical accounts, such as the defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea or the battle of Deborah and Barak against Sisera, nature itself fights on behalf of God's people.

The forest devoured more people of Absalom's men than the sword. Back in chapter 14, the hair of Absalom was described to us as his most notable feature. In verses 25 to 26 of that chapter, Now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom.

[8 : 32] From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head, there was no blemish in him. And when he cut the hair of his head, for at the 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.

Absalom is described here like a ram that is shorn annually and his hair weighed. His hair is cut at the time of sheep shearing at the end of the year. Now this feature becomes his downfall. The sons of the king rode mules, but when Absalom's hair gets caught in the oak, the mule went out from beneath him.

He is unseated from his mule, as he will be unseated from the throne. Much as Ahithophel ended up hanging himself in the preceding chapter, so Absalom, the man who started the coup, is left hanging like his chief advisor.

Given the judgment upon David, with the repayment of four sheep for the one that he stole from the poor man Uriah, perhaps we are supposed to see Absalom as the unblemished ram. Note the description of him as being without blemish, from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

The unblemished ram, the son of David, is caught in the tree, and he will die in David's place. A man brings news to Joab that Absalom is hanging from the tree, and Joab asks him why he didn't kill him, so that he might be rewarded with ten pieces of silver and a belt.

[9 : 45] Yet the man had heard the instruction of David to his commanders, and he was not going to go against the word of the king. He knows that if he had taken Absalom's life, Joab, being a treacherous man, would have allowed him to take all of the blame and the punishment, while Joab himself would escape scot-free.

Joab himself runs Absalom through with three javelins, and then Joab's armour bearers surround Absalom and kill him. Joab calls all the men back from the battle. They have won the victory at this point, the usurper has been killed, and the coup is over.

They take Absalom down from the tree, put him in a pit, and cover it up with a great heap of stones. Hanging dead upon the tree, Absalom was marked out as a man who was cursed, and being buried under a great heap of stones, he reminds us of Achan, and others whose deaths were marked out as a cautionary reminder for future generations.

In these two details we might be reminded of Deuteronomy chapter 21, verses 18 to 23. First of all, verses 22 to 23 read, This commandment, however, comes immediately after another, in verses 18 to 21 of the chapter, which refers to the rebellious son.

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and though they discipline him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives.

[11 : 21] And they shall say to the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice, he is a glutton and a drunkard. Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones, so you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear and fear.

Absalom suffers the death of the cursed man hanging on a tree, and he ends up in a pit covered up with stones, like the man who's the rebellious son. The manner in which his body is treated then is a symbolic declaration of the character of his crimes.

Joab was probably right to recognise that if Absalom was left alive, there would be a continued threat to David's kingdom. David is getting old and he's already weak, and he's going to die very soon.

If Absalom is left alive, there will be continued uncertainty about the succession, and there would be the possibility of another coup. By having many people present at the death, there could be a claim that there was such a commotion that no one knew who took his life, and that way there would be plausible deniability for all involved.

An interesting detail is mentioned here, that Absalom in his lifetime set up a pillar for himself in the king's valley, because he had no son to keep his name in remembrance. This seems to be at odds with the detail that we find in chapter 14 verse 27, where he's mentioned as having three sons, and a daughter called Tamar.

[12 : 37] Perhaps we are to imply that his sons died prematurely, much as Judah's sons died at the beginning of Genesis chapter 38 perhaps, and also as David's sons have been dying. The detail is significant at this juncture though, because Absalom's name and lineage is completely wiped out at this point.

With Absalom's death, his whole line dies. Ahimeaz, the son of Zadok, wants to bring the news back to the king. It is not entirely clear whether Ahimeaz knows that Absalom is dead.

If he does know that he's dead, he brings a deceptive report when he speaks to the king, and suggests uncertainty in the matter. Rather, it is possible that Joab's response to him, in verse 20, should not include, because the king's son is dead, in quotation marks.

That was the reason why Joab did not want to send him, but Ahimeaz may not himself have known of the fact. Ahimeaz, seeing the commotion, and knowing that victory had been achieved, might just presume that Absalom had been captured.

He was well aware that the king had instructed that nothing should happen to Absalom, and he might just presume that the king's wishes would be honoured. Joab sends a Cushite, presumably a man of Ethiopia, to bear the news instead.

[13 : 41] He will bring David both news of the victory and news of the death of Absalom. On two previous occasions in the book of 2 Samuel, David had taken the lives of messengers who sought praise for the demise of some of his enemies, the Amalekites' news of the death of Saul at the battle of Gilboa, and Rechab and Beana's news of their assassination of Ish-bosheth.

Perhaps Joab does not want to put the innocent Ahimeaz in the middle of this situation, and so sends a foreigner instead. However, Ahimeaz insists on bearing the news, and he ends up running ahead of the Cushite and bringing the news to David.

The news is clearly news of a victory. The whole army is not running towards the city, but just one man. The story relates the coming of the messengers with considerable suspense, the watchmen watching from the walls, and David eagerly awaiting for the news of the battle.

When Ahimeaz brings the news, it is news of peace. The Lord has delivered up the enemies of David. However, in this situation, the thing that David really cares about is the fate of his son. Is it well with the young man Absalom?

And Ahimeaz doesn't know. And then the Cushite arrives with his news. He tells again of the victory, but then adds the detail that Absalom has died. David's response is to go up to his chamber above the gate and weep.

[14 : 51] He goes between heaven and earth, as his son died between heaven and earth. He is distraught over the news. He has won this great victory. The coup is over. But yet with the death of his son, it means almost nothing to him.

He would rather he had died rather than Absalom his son. Of course, Absalom his son had ultimately died in part because of David's own sin. David's sin with Bathsheba and the punishment the Lord declared upon it started the balls rolling that would ultimately lead to the coup of Absalom.

And in Absalom's own death, we saw hints of Absalom as a sort of sacrificial lamb taking the place of David. The physically unblemished ram and the son of David dies so that David himself will not die.

There is a sort of poetic justice here as well. Earlier on in chapter 11, David had given explicit instructions to Joab to kill one man in the battle. And here he had given instructions to spare one man in the battle.

On that previous occasion, he had given little thought to the other people who had to die in order that the murder of Uriah and his sin of adultery might be covered up. Now, once again, through the actions of Joab, this sin comes back upon his head.

[15 : 56] Now many lives are spared, but the one life he cares about is lost. David's fatherly affection for Absalom reminds us of the story of Jacob. In the latter part of David's life, he plays out the tragedy of Jacob as the bereaved father.

And here David mourns for Absalom much as Jacob had mourned for Joseph. The death of the dearly beloved son bringing him down to the grave in sorrow. David is the king of Israel in a moment when he has just won the great victory over his enemies.

And all he cares about is his rebel son. It's quite inappropriate. David's failure to exercise proper discipline over his sons and his indulgence of them has produced this situation.

And now his overly indulgent fatherly love is preventing him from playing the part of the king on a day of great national victory and the restoration of the kingdom. In David's tragic words of grief that end this chapter, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom, would I have died instead of you?

O Absalom, my son, my son. We are hearing the words of someone who is tasting the bitterest fruit of his previous sin. Even as a forgiven man, the tragic fruit of David's sin is coming upon his head here.

[17 : 04] A question to consider. What do you think was going through the mind of Joab in this chapter? A question to consider.