

Into The Heart of Absalom  
2 Samuel 17-18:18  
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## Introduction

The Phillies have advanced to the second round of the baseball playoffs, I'm sure many of you are following that closely. Baseball has had its share of scandals through the years, from the Black Sox game-fixing scandal in 1919 to Pete Rose's gambling issues to the steroid era to the sign stealing scandal of a few years ago. Fans of baseball know that every team develops signs that help a pitcher and batter communicate what pitch they want thrown. If an opposing player can figure out what signs are being communicated, it gives them a great advantage to know what pitch is coming next. The line is crossed when teams use video and technology to steal the opposing team's signs. The Boston Red Sox were punished in 2017 for that very infraction, but the bigger offender, the Houston Astros, would not have their rule-breaking brought to light for another two years. And the problem with that was that they won the World Series that year for the first time in their club's history, so many people see that championship as having an asterisk next to it. Using a complicated system of signals coordinated with a TV monitor below the dugout, the team relayed to the batter information about the next pitch. The league fined them \$5 million, took away future draft picks, and suspended their manager and general manager.<sup>1</sup>

Changing gears a little, a story from history: In the early 200s AD, the leader of Northern China named Cao Cao had a dream of uniting the northern and southern parts of China under his rule. He took several hundred thousand soldiers from the North out to battle the Southern army of fewer than 50,000. He decided to attack several targets along the Yangtze River in what became known as the Battle of the Red Cliffs. The move from land to water, however, made his soldiers become seasick because they were not experienced sailors. A spy who had infiltrated Cao Cao's group of advisors convinced him to chain his ships together to prevent further seasickness. He was also told that a rival leader was going to defect and send ships over to help him, but that was a trick as well. The rival leader had his men set flammable material on board their own boats, then sail them at top speed into the middle of the ships that were chained together, lighting the boats on fire before they rammed into the fleet. The rest of the south's army attacked, and the northern troops had to retreat on foot. This was the turning point in the war and ended Cao Cao's hopes of ruling all of China.<sup>2</sup>

What's my point, why these two random anecdotes? Both baseball games and battles are hard to win. But if you steal the opposition's signals or infiltrate their leadership with bad advice, you can significantly improve your ability to win. In our Scripture passage this morning, King David had both of those things and used them in the war against his son, Absalom. Remember that this was not a war that David wanted to be fighting, but his angry, power-hungry son had attacked him. So, since all is fair in love and war, David, the crafty, old, battle-hardened veteran used all the tricks he could to win back his throne. In the first fourteen verses, we'll see these tactics used, and that

### **I. Ahithophel's Plan Comes to an End (17:1-14)**

*<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue David tonight. <sup>2</sup> I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged and throw him into a panic, and all the people who are with him will flee. I will strike down only the king, <sup>3</sup> and I will bring*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/sign-stealing-baseball-history/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.worldhistory.org/Battle\\_of\\_Red\\_Cliffs/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Battle_of_Red_Cliffs/)

*all the people back to you as a bride comes home to her husband. You seek the life of only one man, and all the people will be at peace.”<sup>4</sup> And the advice seemed right in the eyes of Absalom and all the elders of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Then Absalom said, “Call Hushai the Archite also, and let us hear what he has to say.”<sup>6</sup> And when Hushai came to Absalom, Absalom said to him, “Thus has Ahithophel spoken; shall we do as he says? If not, you speak.”<sup>7</sup> Then Hushai said to Absalom, “This time the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good.”<sup>8</sup> Hushai said, “You know that your father and his men are mighty men, and that they are enraged, like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field. Besides, your father is expert in war; he will not spend the night with the people.<sup>9</sup> Behold, even now he has hidden himself in one of the pits or in some other place. And as soon as some of the people fall at the first attack, whoever hears it will say, ‘There has been a slaughter among the people who follow Absalom.’<sup>10</sup> Then even the valiant man, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will utterly melt with fear, for all Israel knows that your father is a mighty man, and that those who are with him are valiant men.<sup>11</sup> But my counsel is that all Israel be gathered to you, from Dan to Beersheba, as the sand by the sea for multitude, and that you go to battle in person.<sup>12</sup> So we shall come upon him in some place where he is to be found, and we shall light upon him as the dew falls on the ground, and of him and all the men with him not one will be left.<sup>13</sup> If he withdraws into a city, then all Israel will bring ropes to that city, and we shall drag it into the valley, until not even a pebble is to be found there.”<sup>14</sup> And Absalom and all the men of Israel said, “The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel.” For the Lord had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the Lord might bring harm upon Absalom.*

The narrator has given us two comments about this advisor, Ahithophel, who has changed sides. Back in 16:23, he said that Ahithophel’s advice was like hearing from God Himself. Here in verse 14 that his advice was good; not morally virtuous, but strategically sound. His plan was the “hurry up and catch them while they’re exhausted” plan. If we act immediately, I can take 12,000 men and track down David and his army while they are tired and discouraged. His men will desert him when we surprise them, and the only casualty will be the king. Then I’ll bring everyone else back to serve you as king, and the war will be over before you know it. Apparently that advice would have worked. It certainly would have kept Absalom safe because he wouldn’t have been part of the attack party. Initially, everyone liked this plan according to verse 4, but for some reason they decided to hear one other plan.

The reader knows that Hushai’s counsel was designed to fail because Hushai agreed to be a double agent at the end of the last chapter. Pretending to have nothing but Absalom’s safety in mind, his plan was the “build an overpowering army and attack later” strategy. First, he poked holes in Ahithophel’s plan: David and his men are not only experts at war, but they’re probably hiding somewhere waiting for an attack. And then rather than David’s men fleeing in a panic, it will be our men who flee in a panic. Then he built up Absalom’s ego: you can lead them out into battle, and you get the battlefield glory when you defeat your father. Fear and pride are a powerful combination, and Hushai takes advantage of both of those things in Absalom. It was full of testosterone – we’ll kill all of David’s men with him and if he hides in a city, we’ll destroy it until every pebble is gone.

Absalom beat his chest and said, “Let’s do that one!” But verse 14 tells us that something more than Absalom’s pride chose that plan – it says that the Lord had worked all that out to defeat Absalom’s rebellion. Hushai’s plan lost the element of surprise and would give David time to regroup and refresh himself, not to mention that it allowed

## **II. David’s Spy Network Achieves Its End (17:15-29)**

*<sup>15</sup> Then Hushai said to Zadok and Abiathar the priests, “Thus and so did Ahithophel counsel Absalom and the elders of Israel, and thus and so have I counseled.”<sup>16</sup> Now therefore send quickly and tell David, ‘Do not stay tonight at the fords of the wilderness, but by all means pass over, lest the king and all the*

people who are with him be swallowed up.”<sup>17</sup> Now Jonathan and Ahimaaz were waiting at En-rogel. A female servant was to go and tell them, and they were to go and tell King David, for they were not to be seen entering the city.<sup>18</sup> But a young man saw them and told Absalom. So both of them went away quickly and came to the house of a man at Bahurim, who had a well in his courtyard. And they went down into it.<sup>19</sup> And the woman took and spread a covering over the well's mouth and scattered grain on it, and nothing was known of it.<sup>20</sup> When Absalom's servants came to the woman at the house, they said, “Where are Ahimaaz and Jonathan?” And the woman said to them, “They have gone over the brook of water.” And when they had sought and could not find them, they returned to Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> After they had gone, the men came up out of the well, and went and told King David. They said to David, “Arise, and go quickly over the water, for thus and so has Ahithophel counseled against you.”<sup>22</sup> Then David arose, and all the people who were with him, and they crossed the Jordan. By daybreak not one was left who had not crossed the Jordan.<sup>23</sup> When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order and hanged himself, and he died and was buried in the tomb of his father.<sup>24</sup> Then David came to Mahanaim. And Absalom crossed the Jordan with all the men of Israel.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> And Israel and Absalom encamped in the land of Gilead.<sup>27</sup> 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,<sup>28</sup> brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, flour, parched grain, beans and lentils,<sup>29</sup> 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.”

After Absalom made his decision to enact Hushai's plan over Ahithophel's, David's informants immediately moved into action. If you were here last week, you heard that two priests, Zadok and Abiathar, and their two sons had been sent back to Jerusalem by David to send reports of Absalom's plans when they overheard them. So, the chain of communication looked like this: Hushai reported to the priests who sent a servant out to their sons, who would then go tell King David. Verses 18-20 explain how that plan was almost foiled by someone who spotted the two sons and reported it to Absalom. Thankfully, the sons hid in a well when the search party came and they were safe to complete their mission. David received his intel and then moved his people across the Jordan, buying him some time and distance from Absalom's attack, and receiving provisions from the locals. This section ends with Absalom appointing an army general, Amasa, and them bringing their forces out to Gilead.

In the middle of all this movement and positioning of armies, though, verse 23 wraps up one loose end in the story: “When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order and hanged himself, and he died and was buried in the tomb of his father.” It does not say exactly why Ahithophel killed himself, only that it was after his counsel was not followed. So, was he so angry at being disrespected, or perhaps depressed that he was not the revered counselor anymore? Either or both of those is possible, but I think that he knows that Hushai's advice will not work; the writing on the wall says that David will end up winning this war. So, he might as well end his life now before he has to face David and be killed for being disloyal anyways. The text does not spell that out, but that's my reading of it.

Where else do we hear that sequence of events – a man close to his leader betrays him to his enemies, but later regrets it, and hangs himself? Perhaps at the end of the gospels, when Judas, one of the twelve apostles, betrayed Jesus to the Jewish authorities. It's possible that Psalm 41:9 is David's lament of Ahithophel: “Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted

his heel against me.” In John 13 (v. 18), Jesus would apply those very words to Judas, his betrayer; so Ahithophel should remind us of Judas. Betrayal that later turned into remorse and suicide.

Furthermore, Ahithophel’s end “foreshadows what is about to happen to his new master, who will also die with his feet dangling in the air.”<sup>3</sup> The first eighteen verses of chapter 18 describe how

### **III. Absalom’s Rebellion Comes to an End (18:1-18)**

*<sup>1</sup> Then David mustered the men who were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. <sup>2</sup> 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.” <sup>3</sup> 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.” <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> So the army went out into the field against Israel, and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> The battle spread over the face of all the country, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> And a certain man saw it and told Joab, “Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak.” <sup>11</sup> 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.” <sup>12</sup> 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.’ <sup>13</sup> 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.” <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him. <sup>16</sup> Then Joab blew the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained them. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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.*

David had been given plenty of time to organize his army thanks to Hushai’s bad advice to Absalom to take his time. So he organized in verses 1-4 into three different units under three of his trusted men, men we’ve met before. He was talked out of going into battle himself, with his men reasoning that his life was the most important life, worth ten thousand regular men. So he stayed back, and when they marched away he gave one request to his departing army generals: “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” These were the words of a father not of the commander in chief. Two chapters ago, Absalom had stood at the city gates of Jerusalem lying about, and betraying, his father; now David stood at a city gate and instructed his soldiers to go easy on his son. Absalom was a traitor who deserved to die, but David could not bring himself to order his death.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2013), p. 268.

Civil Wars are always tragic in the sense that war between two nations that speak different languages and want to take land from one another is understandable; but war among one people, one country is a tragic failure to find a way forward in peace, to save massive bloodshed. And this war was even more tragic because it was essentially a family dispute that wasn't solved until the lives of twenty-thousand men were taken. Twenty-thousand Israelite men who would never again love their wives or help their children grow up. Verse 8 notes that "*the forest devoured more people that day than the sword*," so somehow the wild undergrowth and treacherous terrain contributed to the death toll.<sup>4</sup> And the main death that day was a combination of the forest and the sword. Absalom was riding his royal mule fleeing from a group of David's soldiers when his head got caught in the branches of a thick oak. The text just mentions his head getting stuck, but most readers and commentators assume that it was his hair that got caught, which would seem to be ironic, poetic justice since Absalom was so proud of his long, flowing beautiful hair.

But he was not dead, he just dangled there helplessly. David's men could have captured him and taken him back to the king and earned a great reward for dealing gently with him, as commanded. But there was one who took matters into his own hands. Who would end the life of Absalom, the unpunished murderer? Another unpunished murderer, of course – Joab. As John Chisholm says, David would learn "the hard way that it is dangerous to let hardened, unrepentant murderers go unpunished."<sup>5</sup> Of course, Joab thought he was doing what was best for David, doing the dirty work that needed to be done even if David didn't have the stomach for it. And then ten other soldiers joined in striking Absalom, conceivably to share the blame. And so Absalom died alone as a rebel to the crown and his own father. His burial was an ignoble one, with a great heap of stones piled over him. Perhaps that was fitting, since the penalty in Deuteronomy for a disobedient son was stoning to death.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

The story of Absalom is a cautionary tale, reminding us of the dangers of simmering rage and resentment mixed with prideful ambition. It highlights the complexities of family relationships and how ignoring a problem does not make it go away. Do you know what Absalom's name means? Ab is short for Abba – father. Salom/Shalom is the Hebrew word for peace. "My father's peace," yet obviously he brought strife and war to his father's house and nation.<sup>7</sup> Absalom had some good qualities: he loved his sister, sheltered her after her rape, and wanted justice for her. But he ultimately chose violence and rebellion when he did not get his way. When he saw that David would not punish Amnon, Absalom killed him as his version of justice. And when he saw that David would not be giving him the throne, he chose to take it by poisoning the people against his father and initiating a revolution that was doomed to fail. And we can see by Absalom's behavior during the rebellion how vile and disgusting of a man he had become. This was a man who erected a monument to honor himself, so that future generations would remember his greatness.

Ultimately, Absalom would not become the new king of Israel because God had not willed it so. God had chosen first David, then Solomon as His anointed kings. Absalom's rebellion was a large part of the fallout and punishment for David's great sin, but God would actively frustrate his plans to take over Israel.

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<sup>4</sup> John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel: Your Kingdom Come* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 443.

<sup>5</sup> Chisholm, p. 274.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/ot/2samuel/2samuel.htm>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/absalom/>

When we look at Absalom, we should see a picture of ourselves, of our natural state. We are vain creatures who want only the best for ourselves. When things don't go our way, we attempt to force them to happen. The human condition is one of choosing rebellion, whether it's from deep-seated anger, hatred, or selfishness. In our natural state, Romans 3:14-18 says that, *"Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes."*

So, humanity's sin and selfishness lashes out at other human beings, but ultimately, our target is the same as Absalom's: the Lord and His anointed. Psalm 2:1-4 - *"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, **against the Lord and against his Anointed**, saying, <sup>3</sup> 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.'" How will our rebellion against Him fare? The next two verses: <sup>4</sup> *"He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. <sup>5</sup> Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, <sup>6</sup> 'As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.'" What is the end of every rebellion against the Lord's anointed? Defeat, death, and eternal punishment. God may allow us many years to live and be patient for our rebellion to run its course, but in the end, we will fare no better than Absalom. As Johnny Cash sang, "You can run on for a long time, sooner or later God'll cut you down."**

But there is a far superior way. When we turn from our rebellion and embrace the King, we inherit the kingdom with Him. We realize that God is not like David, flawed and callous to justice. God is the Creator of the universe and He is the perfect Father who wants nothing but the best for His sons and daughters. We live in a fallen world and we are born with sinful natures that want our own ways. But God calls us to become whole and complete, forgiven and free by following Him. He calls us to His shalom, His peace. And He does that in an amazing way, and it's a way that we see in this passage, just understood in a deeper way: The price of restoring the kingdom is the death of a son hung on a tree. But this time, instead of the rebellious son, it was a righteous Son. "Absalom died hanging in a tree with a spear for his rebellion thrust through his heart; Jesus died on a tree with a spear for our rebellion thrust through His."<sup>8</sup> Jesus gave His life in our place, He suffered the consequences of our rebellion by dying and taking God's wrath so that we don't have to.

Romans 5:8-10: *"but 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. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life."* Beloved, God loves His rebel sons and daughters and did everything He needed to do to extend love and forgiveness to us. Those of you who have accepted His terms of surrender and peace know the joy of forgiveness and eternal life. Those who do have not found new life in Christ yet, lay down your arms and surrender to your loving heavenly Father. Amen.

Benediction - Ephesians 3:20-21 - *"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."*

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<sup>8</sup> Heath Thomas & J.D. Greear, *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Samuel* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), p. 240.