

December 18, 2016  
Sunday Morning Service  
Series: The Life of David  
Community Baptist Church  
643 S. Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
© 2016 David J. Whitcomb

**FRIENDS AND ASSOCIATIONS IN TIMES  
OF DISCIPLINE  
2 Samuel 15:1-37**

I had a teacher in high school who often said, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” He also would say, “When the going gets tough, the fickle get going in the opposite direction.” Who among us has not dealt with the pain of so-called friends bailing out on us at the least favorable times? All of us have either experienced this firsthand or have observed it as others endured the difficulty. When sailing is smooth, when the organization, or club, or family, or business is plodding along or even making progress, it appears like everyone is on the same page. But as soon as the winds become adversarial, people whose hearts were not really with you seem to disappear. How does that happen?

Life is a process of ebb and flow much like the tides of the ocean. Today you have much support as you march off to do battle with the competition. But tomorrow, when the competition appears to be much stronger than you, all that support has vanished. And then the organization, school, church, or even kingdom, as is the case in our story, rebuilds. It is in the process of the ebbing and flowing that we learn who really is all in and who is not.

Are the tides of life just natural occurring events or is there a Controller behind the tides? We who love the Lord and desire to serve Him, truly believe that God is behind every change of circumstances in life. Often He Himself is the author of those changes as well as the Blessed Controller in the circumstances. Therefore, we can enjoy the good and endure the bad alike with all confidence and assurance because we know that God is in control.

Put yourself in David’s sandals and you might come to a different conclusion. We are not sure at what point in David’s reign this revolt took place. We know that it came after David’s great sin with Bathsheba and at least five or nine years after Absalom’s great sin of murdering his brother. If we understand human nature at all, we should conclude that there were probably many times after David’s sin with Bathsheba that he thought about God’s promised consequences of that sin. Is God in charge of consequences too? If we believe that, we might be timid to step up and confront issues that are potentially volatile for fear of being rebuked.

That is probably David’s attitude as it lies behind the unfolding of the tragic details of this story. While God was moving people and circumstances to make David more like Himself, the people in the story were acting like people tend to act. Some proved to be faithful friends and some proved to be fickle friends. But all people and all responses speak of God’s work for His own glory.

**Fickle Associations (vv.1-12).**

Almost without exception is the truth that unfaithful relationships fail in the face of deception (vv.1-6). Shallow or weak relationships can’t take the pressure. Such was the case regarding Absalom. How did he pull off this coup? The ungrateful, unprincipled son laid a foundation of deception. In very practical ways, this spoiled son made himself look appealing. *After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him (v.1).* He was still a spoiled child who had grown to be a man with a child’s impulsiveness and unreasonableness—but a man’s passions.

Therefore, it was intentional, not accidental, that he subtly stole the hearts of the people. *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, "Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice" (vv.2-4).*

David's son warned his son about people like his half brother Absalom. *A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends. (Proverbs 16:28)*. He also taught, *Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man (Proverbs 22:24)*. It should have been obvious that Absalom hated Amnon because of what he did to his sister (13:22). In a similar way, he manifested anger at Joab for not coming to see him (14:29-30). Wisdom tells us to identify people like this and stay away from them.

As we said previously, winning the hearts of the people was not accidently or coincidental—it was a plan. Absalom understood the relational circumstances well enough around Jerusalem to know that David had made some enemies. Which leader has not? A man or woman cannot lead without offending someone. The subtle and wicked man finds those offended “someones” and gathers them into a coalition against the disliked leader.

Something very similar to this actually took place with David years earlier when Saul sought to kill him. David went to hide out in the rocks of Engedi and, *And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him. And he became captain over them. And there were with him about four hundred men (1 Samuel 22:2)*. This very sequence has been the cause for untold numbers of new churches starting across America, and probably in foreign nations also. While it is almost always good to establish new churches, it is not good to establish them by gathering together everyone who has a gripe against the current pastor and then splitting the church and establishing another one. Finding disgruntled people is as easy as finding a fellow human.

It is easy for the person who has no track record to promise a suitable and favorable track record to disgruntled people. Too often the disgruntled people buy in. In David's situation, forgetful people abandoned their relationship with the king. *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 of Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel (v5-.6)*.

Reading the story 3,000 years later, we can almost hear the people who Absalom gathered around himself saying things like,

“The king's son was such a nice man.” Yes, it would appear that he was. But what about loyalty to the king who had rescued the people from their enemies? Did that happen too many years previously? This was like a new generation that grew up taking the blessing the king had secured for granted. These “Millennial” kind of people honestly thought they owed King David nothing. It wasn't a matter of forgetfulness or carelessness. This is unrighteousness. God's rules were broken. Job rightly concluded, *He who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty (Job 6:14)*. This was the same heart of wickedness that Judas owned. David actually warned about the future coming of Judas when he wrote, *Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me (Psalm 41:9)*.

How did the good people feel while this deterioration was going on around them? Maybe they concluded that when a foundation of deception is in place, it is difficult to prevent disaster (vv.7-12). Someone should have listened to Deputy Barney Fife's solution to problems like this. He would say, “Nip it! Nip it in the bud.” Our text reveals that Absalom got away with this subterfuge for four years. At the end of four years, the damage had been done. Absalom's rebellion, his stealing of the peoples' hearts should have been obvious to David and his advisors. David should have stopped it swiftly, acting as both authoritative father and king. He didn't. Why not?

Maybe David felt like he lost his authority. Obvious from the story is the fact that there were a good number of people who felt like David didn't listen to them. Obviously his popularity had waned since those early days. In those early days a lot of folks would have rebuked Absalom and ratted him out to the king.

Surely David was not fully deceived. He should have seen evidence of the problem. If nothing else, “Lord” kind of talk from a deceiver ought to ring hallow. Did David really believe that Absalom really had vowed a vow to the LORD? See verses seven and eight. *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'" (vv.7-8)*.

Considering who his father was, we are not surprised that Absalom was familiar with the language about vows and stuff and the expected activity of followers of the LORD. This is a common danger for children who become adults in devout homes. They know what God expects, but they don't know God. Rebellion against God-ordained fathers is serious business; rebellion against God-ordained fathers while invoking the name of God deserves special scrutiny.

Apparently, Absalom was not too concerned about what God really expects. In fact, he had a particular reason for making the vow in Hebron and it had nothing to do with worshiping God. This is where we are right to question the veracity of the vow.

Most obvious are the facts that Hebron was several miles from Jerusalem and the center of the king's authority. Also, we remember that Hebron is where the people crowned David as king. Because David's kingdom began in Hebron, there might have been deep-seated jealousy when David moved the throne to Jerusalem.

Unfortunately, David the father/king was as deceived as the deceiver was. *The king said to him, "Go in peace." So he arose and went to Hebron (v.9).* "Go in peace" was a simple blessing, a way of granting permission. Was David totally ignorant of Absalom's revealed character? What about God's promise that: *"There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked" (Isaiah 48:22)?* David should have been able to discern that Absalom was wicked and, therefore, should not have blessed his plan.

Why didn't David see what Absalom was doing? What didn't David set his foot down and either send the deceiver into exile or execute him—both of which would have been justifiable acts? Maybe David was suffering from guilt, assuming that because of his sin, he had forfeited any right to impose righteousness. The story of David's life, after his wicked acts with Bathsheba and Uriah, seems to portray a man without confidence and zeal. It is like David led with a spiritual and emotional limp from that time onward.

The story of David's life is a sad reminder that few leaders ride off into the beautiful sunset completely successful like some kind of John Wayne movie. Much of the time our western horizons are covered with ominous clouds that present questions and discouragement. But still we must ride off into them.

Maybe when David learned what was going on, he lost hope. Maybe he remembered what he had written, *If the foundations are destroyed what can the righteous do (Psalm 11:3)?* It sure looked like, with the wicked man's plan in place, the foundations were going to be destroyed. The plan was in place. *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!'" (v.10).*

The recruits did what they were told. However, the two hundred demonstrators were clueless about their involvement because unsuspecting people make great pawns for deceptive leaders. *With Absalom went two hundred men from Jerusalem who were invited guests, and they went in their innocence and knew nothing (v.11).*

Finally we learn from the story that the final piece of the puzzle was put in place. *And while Absalom was offering the sacrifices, he sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counselor, from his city Giloh. And the conspiracy grew strong, and the people with Absalom kept increasing (v.12).* Absalom chose Ahithophel to be his chief advisor. The guy came with a reputation for having God's mind. He had been David's most trusted advisor. But it is also likely that he was Bathsheba's grandfather—in which case David had forfeited the man's loyalty through his sin. The story almost presents a picture of the nation unraveling, out of control. How did this happen? Who was really responsible? This was "of the LORD."

### **Faithful Friends (vv.13-37)**

Servants are ready to obey the king's commands (vv.13-18). If they are not, are they really servants? The king's command was clear and simple. He told the servants that they needed to skedaddle (vv.13-14). *And a messenger came to David, saying, "The hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom" (v.13).*

Hearing that news, David must have felt as if God had turned all the tables against His chosen servant. First, there was the calamity that the great bulk of the people had revolted against him and were moving to unseat him from the throne God had established. Would they kill the King? That would not be the first time in history that such a thing happened. Near the end of Israel's and Judah's

independence, assassination of kings was not uncommon. It is true that David had deserved the death penalty, but God had spared him. Did God change His mind?

Second, there was the discovery of the villainy, hypocrisy, and heartless cruelty of his favorite and popular son. God had promised upheaval within David's family as a consequence of his sin. What is more discouraging than a child who turns against his parent.

Third, was David's discovery that the hearts of the people were with Absalom. David loved his people, but many of them turned against him now. Instead they showed love for the sinister usurper of the throne.

In light of these discoveries, it looked like David had only one option. *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 for us 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" (v.14).*

Off they went and the servants passed by the king (vv.15-18). They were leaving Jerusalem because that was the king's command. True servants are always ready to obey. *And the king's servants said to the king, "Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever my lord the king decides" (v.15).* Unlike the servants who sided with Absalom, these servants were tightly connected with the fleeing king. His fear was their fear. His plight was their plight. But there were a lot of people who would have been known as servants of the king who were now connected with Absalom.

The same truth is observable still. Many are the "associates" of successful or popular leaders, but how dependable is their loyalty? When the winds of favor shift, many so-called servants can no longer be found. We observe this with businesses, schools, churches, even families. Fickle commitment (which is no commitment) is a flaw of sinful human nature. That is why Jesus often warned that lack of faithfulness to Him indicated no real relationship with Him. He said, *"For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35).*

Does it really matter if we stick with it? Yes, because in God's plan, faithfulness in friendship is akin to godliness. Solomon observed that *A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity (Proverbs 17:17).* Jesus taught that reward for remaining

faithful to King Jesus is out of this world. He told the disciples, *"You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:28-30).* That is a pretty good reward. Better yet is that King Jesus remains faithful to us regardless of the circumstances. David learned that *The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant (Psalm 25:14).*

The rejected king stood by the roadside and observed as his real friends passed by. A review of faithful servants can be encouraging. *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 (vv.16-17).* According to this part of the story, the entourage stopped at the last house. It appears that everyone was leaving the city of David. They must have traveled down the hillside toward the Mount of Olives. Apparently, just before the group crossed over the brook Kidron and out toward the wilderness of the Jordan River, the king and His close associates stopped to review who was accompanying them.

Faithful warriors would be useful for protecting the king. *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 (v.18).* Six hundred Gittites from Gath must be a reference to the soldiers who were with David at the strongholds in the rocks of the wilderness. I assume that they had been with David when he failed in his association with the king of Gath. These warriors had proven themselves faithful to David for many years. People like that who are willing to sacrifice to protect or to help you are valuable friends. Maclaren wrote, "Amid the faithless a few were found faithful. Friends in such need were friends indeed. And the sight of their honest though perplexed countenances, and the sound of their friendly though trembling voices, would be most soothing to his feelings, and serve to rally the energy that had almost left him. When the world forsakes us, the few friends that remain are of priceless value" (Alexander Maclaren).

But would it not be wise to have some people who are faithful to the king stay in Jerusalem to see what happens, report of decisions, try to impact decisions and take care of David's things?

David learned that faithful friends are helpful friends (vv.19-38). One of those friends was a fellow named Ittai. *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 (vv.19-23).*

Ittai revealed amazing loyalty. He had been David's friend for only a short time (v.20). Yet he was as determined to befriend David, even if it cost personal sacrifice, as Ruth was determined to help Naomi.

Then there were Abiathar and Zadok and the Levites. *And Abiathar came up, and behold, Zadok came also with all the Levites, bearing the ark of the covenant of God. 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 favor in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me back and let me see both it 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, Ahimaaz 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.*

Zadok and Abiathar were in charge of worshiping and in charge of caring for the physical symbol of God's presence—His ark. David

might have remember the history of when the people took the ark to battle during Eli's day and concluded that it was a bad choice to repeat that fiasco. Instead David chose to have faith in God to restore him to his throne in the city. Plus it would be good to have some loyal informers in the city.

Then along came Hushai the counselor. *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." While David was coming to the summit, where God was worshiped, 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 priests 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, Ahimaaz, 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.*

David and friends ascended the Mount of Olives in great distress. Life was unraveling. There appeared to be no easy answers. Especially ominous was the fact that the man who was famous for righteous advice had turned against David for good reason. In such times of trouble it is still good to pray. *And David said, "O LORD, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness."* Would God make the counsel of a man who He had blessed sound foolish? That seems like it is contrary to God's will.

Actually, God answered David's prayer almost immediately. Hushai, a friend and counselor just happened to show up right at that moment. We shall see in the subsequent story how God sent this man to do exactly what David had prayed about.

Life was falling apart. God had promised that David's sin would bring hard days of discipline. Should we get angry with God during

such days? Should we doubt God? Should we abandon God? Like David, we should worship God, pray for God's help, and rejoice in the people God puts in our lives to help us on to His will.