
The Fall of Ahithophel

2 Samuel 16:15-17:??¹⁷

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God's people may look at the vileness of human wickedness and not despair. Along with the writer of Proverbs, we can affirm with the same unshakable conviction that, "The way of transgressors is hard" (Proverbs 13:15, AV). David is struggling under the heavy hand of his own chastening. But Ahithophel will begin to experience the hardness of his traitorous, transgressing ways.

Our narrative tonight is against the backdrop of Absalom's insurrection against his father, David. Absalom is marching on Jerusalem and David has gathered up his family, soldiers and servants to flee and fight another day.:

David has sent Hushai in as a mole and to give disinformation through his counsel.

David has planted two priests in the city who will be the conduits for any information learned.

David has led his entourage to the Jordon fords at the crossing into the wilderness. He has planned to camp there, possibly for an extended period.

Now our narrator takes back to the scenes in Jerusalem...

A Dangerous Game (v. 15-19)

Hushai, the confident and counselor of David is playing a dangerous game...

¹⁵ Now Absalom and all the people, the men of Israel, came to Jerusalem, and Ahithophel with him. ¹⁶ And when Hushai the Archite, David's friend, came to Absalom, Hushai said to Absalom, "Long live the king! Long live the king!" ¹⁷ And Absalom said to Hushai, "Is this your loyalty to your friend? Why did you not go with your friend?" ¹⁸ And Hushai said to Absalom, "No, for whom the Lord and this people and all the men of Israel have chosen, his I will be, and with him I will remain. ¹⁹ And again, whom should I serve? Should it not be his son? As I have served your father, so I will serve you."

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The Initial Approach (v. 15-16)

Absalom arrived in Jerusalem. I imagine he still has his chariot and his 50 men running before him. He is strong, handsome with long waving locks of hair. He is the rock-star King. There is Ahithophel with him. So the dazzling king is accompanied by the best and wisest counselor.

Hushai, who is carefully identified as David's friend, meets Absalom and hails him as the king. This is an acknowledgement of recognizing Absalom as king. He is saying, "I am this king's subject and servant."

The Skeptical Challenge (v. 17)

Absalom is not sure. He has been in and out of David's court his whole life. He knows Hushai's relationship with David. He challenges Hushai's loyalty, not to king David, but to David as his friend? Certainly one of the questions is, "Is this what loyalty means to you? You will turn your back on your friend? Why would I value such loyalty? You are going to have to explain why you didn't go with your friend. And you are going to have to explain why I should trust you."

Well that looks like it is going to be a problem for the plan of David and the mission of Hushai.

The Deceiving Commitment (v. 18-19)

Hushai's reply plays to the vanity and vision of Absalom.

No, for whom the Lord and this people and all the men of Israel have chosen, his I will be, and with him I will remain. ¹⁹ And again, whom should I serve? Should it not be his son? As I have served your father, so I will serve you."

What an interesting reply the first reason is. It is both subtle and exposing. Whoever God and the people choose, he will serve. Except that Israel is theocracy. The people are simply to accept the Lord's choice. But this is playing to Absalom's pride and self-importance. The people's hearts are with him. He is the popular king.

The second reason is: who is else there to serve but the son of David? He has served David faithfully as king. He will serve the next king faithfully. He is disaffirming that he served David as his friend.

Now this raises a troubling question. Is it right for Hushai to say this? Isn't this a lie? Is deceit an acceptable tactic in certain situations?

This text nor any text, does not condemn Hushai. The Bible often does not condone nor condemn actions like these. We have several instances of this in David's life and one other, Rahab's faith that included lying to hide the Jewish spies, is commended in Hebrews 11.

Hushai is serving in a war at the command and directive of the true king. He is obeying the king and positioning himself to counter the counsel of Ahithophel.

Not all deception is lying and sin, then think on the ramifications for Christians serving in the military, undercover work as police and detectives. Think about camouflage, concealed carry, fakes in sports and a myriad of other activities where truth withheld might be construed as lying.

The Mosaic Law and its case law focused on telling the truth when called upon to speak *about* your neighbor. So, with all its implications, God commanded Israel not to make a false statement against your neighbor.

An observed distinction in the Old Testament and that is highlighted in the New Testament is that we are to speak the truth to our “neighbor”. So this certainly means it is sin for you to deceive your spouse and another Christian.

A Degrading Insult (v. 20-23)

In the battle of counselors, Ahithophel has the first round...

²⁰ Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, “Give your counsel. What shall we do?” ²¹ Ahithophel said to Absalom, “Go in to your father’s concubines, whom he has left to keep the house, and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself a stench to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened.” ²² So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof. And Absalom went in to his father’s concubines in the sight of all Israel. ²³ Now in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the word of God; so was all the counsel of Ahithophel esteemed, both by David and by Absalom.

The Troubling Advice (v. 21-21)

A simple question with shocking response. Absalom has arrived and is now in control of the city. So what is the first thing we should do?

Ahithophel advises that Absalom consolidate his place in the eyes of the people by publicly having sex with the concubines David left in the city. This will utterly put to end the possibility of a negotiated peace. The effect is that the people will see that Absalom is all in.

The Depraved Acts (v. 22-23)

So they execute the plan. They put a tent out in the open terrace in the sight of all the people. The tent would hide the acts, but the people would still know what is happening. There is so much that our author hides from us. The dreadful hours... The fear and degradation of the women... The animal lust of Absalom... The shock of the people...

Yet this terrible deed is the fulfillment of the prophecy Nathan made to David. It is a part of David’s chastening in 2 Samuel 12:10-12.

¹⁰ Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ ¹¹ Thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and

he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. ¹² For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.”

We can observe several principles in regards to chastening:

God will always do what He says in chastening his children.

Often, God uses the sin of others to chasten us similar to Absalom’s rebellion against his father.

Often, God uses other’s sin **against us** to chasten us.

Sadly, often other people suffer because of the chastening by God.

People are still responsible for their sins even when God is using that as a means of chastening.

There is much we can say about these principles, but they are evident all through Bible from Deuteronomy 8 to Hebrews 12.

A Decisive Plan (v. 1-4)

Ahithophel continues with part two of his consolidation plan. This took place on the first day Absalom entered the city and is the second part of his counsel to Absalom when asked what to do next.

¹ Moreover, Ahithophel said to Absalom, “Let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue David tonight. ² 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, ³ and I will bring 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.” ⁴ And the advice seemed right in the eyes of Absalom and all the elders of Israel.

His Wise Offer (v. 1-3)

This is a very interesting piece of advice. Because imbedded in it is an offer. Ahithophel is offering to lead the army against David. He wants to take advantage of the weakness and weariness of David and his soldiers and servants. He wants to gather up 12,000 men and go after David immediately. The focus is on capturing or killing David and preventing a civil war. With David gone, all Israel will be happy to submit to Absalom.

His Wide Acclaim (v.4)

This plan receives wide acceptance and acclaim. Absalom approves of it. The elders see its wisdom. There is a certain irony here. The wicked son and rebellious leaders of Israel see the “wisdom” of striking out quickly and decisively at the anointed King of Israel. This is the best course to follow.

Does this foreshadow the counsel that surrounded the plot against Jesus? Then the true king was rejected by the civil and religious leadership. The counsel was to strike quickly lest all the people go after Jesus. It seemed best to all to kill David for the sake of the

nation. And so it seemed to the High Priest Ciaphas as well. Kill Jesus for the sake of the nation.

A Deliberate Reversal (v. 5-14)

Absalom decides to call Hushai to get his take on this piece of advice. Will he agree with the obvious wisdom of this?

⁵ Then Absalom said, "Call Hushai the Archite also, and let us hear what he has to say." ⁶ And when Hushai came to Absalom, Absalom said to him, "Thus has Ahithophel spoken; shall we do as he says? If not, you speak." ⁷ Then Hushai said to Absalom, "This time the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good." ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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.' ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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." ¹⁴ 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.

His Summons (v. 5-6)

Hushai is not a part of the inner circle. He has been accepted as a loyalist. But this will be his induction into the inner advisors of Absalom. He is summoned, and apprised of Ahithophel's counsel. "Tell us what you think", commands Absalom.

His Counsel (v. 7-13)

Hushai's counsel begins with reminding them all what kind of man, no, what kind of warrior, David is. He is smart. He is strong. He is dangerous. He lived on the run from Saul for years. What Hushai describes here would all be drawn from David's exploits as a warrior and as a fugitive. And, he turns up the volume a little. The risk is too great. If David and his army get the upper hand, then the rebellion is over before it really even has a chance to get started.

While Ahithophel's counsel has been for a quick, strategic and surgical use of force and timing, Hushai is arguing for overwhelming force against a very experienced and dangerous warrior. Gather up a huge force – much larger than 12,000 men. Wait until

all are ready and the attack can be launched. Then David and all his supporters can be completely crushed.

Hushai knows that David is trading space for time. He knows that Absalom will be no match for David in the open field. He also recognizes the great danger David is in at the moment. So his advice is designed to shield David now and to give him time to prepare to deal with Absalom when and where David chooses.

His Affirmation (v. 14)

So which sounds better to a megalomaniac like Absalom? Of course, the gathering of a massive army with him at its head. Crushing his father and all his supporters feeds into his fear and his pride.

Behind the counsel of Hushai and the acceptance of Absalom is the secret working of the plans of God. The Lord had determined to bring harm to Absalom. He had chosen to do so through countering of Ahithophel's counsel. His purposes and plans are being worked out. His secret power is working through it all to chasten David, bring down Ahithophel, promote Hushai and destroy Absalom.

The Dangerous Mission (v. 15-22)

Having succeeded in overturning the wise counsel of Ahithophel, Hushai now takes steps to get the information to David.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.' " ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ And the woman took and spread a covering over the well's mouth and scattered grain on it, and nothing was known of it. ²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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." ²² 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.

The Warning Message (v. 15-16)

Hushai composes and passes along a warning message. He warned David not to stay at the fords. He needs to go on up into the wilderness or in the hill country. If David stays at the fords, Absalom will come and defeat him.

The Near Escape (v. 17-20)

A plan had been made to pass along the message. It was designed not to expose the priests. They could go and pass along the message without entering or leaving the city so they would not be seen. However, they were seen and reported to Absalom. They were hidden in a well. The lady of the house covered the opening and sprinkled grains on the top. When the servants of Absalom came seeking the two spies, she sent the servants on a wild goose chase. The servants of course could not find the priests-spies and returned empty-handed.

The Warning Delivered (v. 21-22)

The spies are released from their hiding place and go quickly to pass on Hushai's warning message. David took immediate heed to the warning. He packed up his household, his servants and his soldiers. By dawn, the fords were left empty. They began the journey northward up into the familiar wilderness of Mahanaim.

The Deadly End (v. 23)

A surprising and sad turn of events takes their deadly course.

²³ 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.

The Heart of Pride

Ahithophel may have been wise about other men's affairs, but his heart was foolishly full of pride. He simply cannot abide his loss of standing. His counsel is not followed. So, his life is not worth living. Ahithophel in his pride has made a grave error in his thinking. He has confused what he does and says with who he is. Since others will not listen, then why continue? It is better the silence of death.

The Deed of Death

So, he goes home. In the larger text our author sees donkeys loaded with different burdens. Ziba's donkeys were loaded with the burden of provisions for David. Now this donkey is bearing the burden of disappointed and depressed advisor. He makes sure all is in order with his finances and family. And then he hangs himself.

Some disappointments are hard to bear. None are impossible unless our heart is weakened by pride, by self-importance, by fear of man, by misplaced identity and hope. Then, disappointment and discouragement can quickly spiral down into terrible deeds, even suicide.

The Distinct Armies (v. 24-29)

Israel sets in for a long and bloody civil war. The narrative moves between the two armies with the build-up preparing us for the final climatic clash.

The Leadership of Absalom's Army (v. 24-26)

²⁴ Then David came to Mahanaim. And Absalom crossed the Jordan with all the men of Israel. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ And Israel and Absalom encamped in the land of Gilead.

Some time takes place for David to arrive in Mahanaim. Absalom has gathered a large army and also crosses the Jordan to pursue David. Joab has been replaced by an Amasa. Amasa is a descendent of Ishmael and a cousin of Joab on his mother's side.

The Provision for David's Army (v. 27-29)

In contrast to the treachery of Absalom and the Ishmaelite in command of his army, our narrator holds up the great loyalty and help of three men.

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."

Shobi was a son of the Ammonite royal house. He may have been appointed by David to rule that now subjugated kingdom. (2 Samuel 12:26-31). Makir had been the loyal friend of Mephibosheth, Saul's crippled grandson, when he had been destitute. (2 Samuel 9:4). Finally Barzillai the Gileadite is named. He was, as one writer put it, "a doughty octogenarian whose open-handed generosity so impressed David that he later invited the old man to stay with him in Jerusalem at the royal expense." [Keddie, p.168] These men brought provisions so that David and all that were with him were abundantly supplied.

Reflect and Respond

God can and will work out His sovereign plan. He will thwart the counsel of the wise so that the Lord's purposes are fulfilled. It is a great warning to those who seek to oppose the Word and will of God. This is a great blessing and comfort to God's people.

God can and will use people's sin to accomplish his purposes. Even our salvation was accomplished when wicked men took the Lord of glory and crucified Him even as and exactly as God had planned.

The downfall of Ahithophel foreshadows the final destruction of all the wicked. Even in all their human wisdom and pride, God knows how to humble the arrogant. Be warned. We encouraged.

How do you respond when you are not listened to? How do you respond when those who have taken your counsel in the past now take another's? Does your response come from pride or humility? Will your response lead to discouragement and depression? May God grant you the grace to counsel well, to receive rejection well and to be pleasing to God, whether you are heard or not.

The Lord's counsel is always wise and always to be heeded. We are always to trust that His ways are best. And so another Psalm written around these dark hours, **Psalm 55:22–23**

²² Cast your burden on the LORD,
and he will sustain you;
he will never permit
the righteous to be moved.

²³ But you, O God, will cast them down
into the pit of destruction;
men of blood and treachery
shall not live out half their days.

But I will trust in you.

Notes