

## 2 SAMUEL

### Part Three: Chapters 17-24

This is a continuation of Part Two of 2Samuel, which deals with David's sin and its consequences.

#### CHAPTER 17: Absalom seeks the counsel of Ahithophel and Hushai

*"The Lord had decided to undo Ahithophel's good counsel, in order thus to bring Absalom to ruin."* (v.14)

Absalom holds a war council, raising the question: What is the best way to move against David? He seeks the counsel of Ahithophel and Hushai.

**Verses 1-4—Ahithophel's advice.** Ahithophel advises Absalom to move quickly against the weary king with the sole aim of capturing and killing him. In this way, he will not alienate others. Once David is out of the picture, his followers will be wooed to Absalom like a bride to her husband (v.3). In Ahithophel's plan, he will lead the army and eliminate the risk of Absalom being hurt or killed.

**Verses 5-14—Hushai's advice.** Hushai begins by diplomatically stating that while Ahithophel usually gives good advice, this time he has fallen short (v.7). He has underestimated David's strength in war, his tactical skill and the courage of his men. Hushai presents Absalom with an alternative plan, one that is much more elaborate and will take a lot more time to put together. Hushai knows the longer he can delay Absalom, the more time David will have to prepare for battle.

The contrast between the two strategies could not be clearer: the simple, quick plan of Ahithophel versus the slow, grandiose plan of Hushai. If common sense would suggest going with Ahithophel's plan, verse 14 tells us that God had already decided on the matter. *"The Lord had already decided to undo Ahithophel's good counsel, in order thus to bring Absalom to ruin."* We can say that verse 14 is God answering David's prayer that Ahithophel's counsel be rejected (See 15:31). Walter Brueggemann comments: *"Victory is not given to the quick or to the strong but to the chosen"* (cf. Prov. 21:30-31).

**Verses 15-22** describe how Hushai, with the help of a clever woman much like Rahab (Josh 2), is able to get word to David to move away from where he and his

soldiers are located. Knowing that Absalom's fate is doomed and that he has no future, Ahithophel commits suicide (v.23).

#### CHAPTER 18: Defeat and death of Absalom

*"Is young Absalom safe?"* (v.32)

This chapter continues the unfolding between David and his rebellious son-turned-enemy, the classic rich kid who felt entitled to his father's kingdom - now

David prepares for battle by dividing his army into three commands under the experienced leadership of Joab and Abishai and the newly arrived Ittai. Before the troops depart for battle, the king says to his generals: *"Be gentle with the young Absalom for my sake"* (v.5).

The description of the battle (vv 6-8) is brief and to the point. Absalom's forces are soundly defeated. As with many biblical battles, natural forces (in this case, a treacherous forest) conspire to win the battle. *The Colledgeville Commentary* notes: *"The victory is not to those who fight as much as to the Lord who moves events according to his will"* (p.291).

**Verses 9-18—Death of Absalom.** Verse 8 states that *"the thickets consumed more combatants that day than the sword."* Now Absalom becomes a victim of the thickets and his gorgeous hair (14:26) becomes a fatal liability. When a nameless man tells his general that he has seen Absalom hanging on a tree, Joab asks why he did not kill him. The man responds how could he kill the king's son. Moreover, he does not believe that Joab will defend him before the king (v.13).

Even though Joab has told his generals and troops to be "gentle with Absalom," he does not hesitate to kill the son who has not only brought his father so much grief, but also caused a civil war in the nation. As far as Joab is concerned, Absalom is the enemy and should not be spared.

**Chapters 18:19-19:1—Bringing news of Absalom's death to David.** Imagining that the king will be glad to hear that his rebellious son is dead, the Cushite does not hesitate to break the news to the king. The news of Absalom's death is good news for David's

army and for the nation, and also for *David the King*, but it is terrible news for *David the father* who loves his son. David responds neither as a king or as a military leader but as a crushed father. Victory is turned into mourning. Contrasting sentiments are expressed in the two heartfelt statements (1) by the Cushite: “*May the enemies of my king...be like that young man*”, and (2) by the bereaved father: “*My son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you....*” (19:1).

Walter Brueggemann writes: “*David enters into deep, unrestrained, unguarded grief. This is David’s most distressed moment, and perhaps his greatest. ...David’s cry is an anguished review of all that could have been and was not, of dreams so feebly enacted, of caring so selfishly limited, so niggardly expressed. ...At last, David enters fully into the cost and joy of that relationship. Earlier he had been only willing to say, “the young man Absalom” (18:5). Now it is not “the young man” but “my son.” David stands barren and un comforted in his grief*” (ibid. p.323).

**Pause:** What spoke to you most in chapters 17-18? Have you ever had to break the news of someone’s death to a loved one? If so, what was that experience like for you? What was it like to hear the news that a loved one had died?

## CHAPTER 19: Joab speaks strong words to his king

“*I am now certain that if Absalom were alive today and all of us dead, you would think that more suitable.*” (v.7)

While a nation grieved the death of President Kennedy, someone had to mind the shop and run the nation. In this case, Joab is the one who steps up to the plate to make sure that the king’s grief for his rebellious son does not lead to another rebellion.

David’s loyal general speaks words to him that no one else dares speak (vv 6-9). “*Joab accuses the king of having his priorities confused and his values mixed up. Joab cannot understand how a king would be so soft, unappreciative and preoccupied to value a traitor over loyal subjects*” (Brueggemann). Then Joab tells David to get off his tail end and go out to the balcony and show his appreciation to his troops and the people.

**Verses 10-41—David reconciles with alienated factions.** These verses focus on David’s efforts to reunite his divided kingdom.

**Verses 10-15** describe the reconciliation with the northern tribes. A big surprise is David’s decision to replace his loyal and effective general, Joab, with Absalom’s lead general, Amasa. This move by David would be similar to President Truman’s firing of General MacArthur. Why has David done this? Perhaps he has found out that Joab did not deal gently with Absalom. More likely, he knows that such a move will secure the allegiance of the rebel army. Furthermore, Amasa has a great deal of influence with the leaders of Judah.

Now follow encounters with three men whom David also met on his way out of Jerusalem, Shimei (vv 16-24), Meribaa (vv 25-31), and Barzillai, each one representing important constituencies whom David needs to come to terms with. David shows tremendous generosity and mercy towards all three.

**Verses 42-44—A smoldering division.** An problem arises between the Judahites (David’s tribe) and the rest of Israel (in this passage, the name Israel excludes Judah) regarding the restoration of David’s kingship. The breakdown anticipates a full-blown rift between these two tribes that will occur after the reign of Solomon. The current unity of the country is very tenuous. The northern tribes are not happy and harbor resentment towards Judah.

**Pause:** In a grieving situation, what or who helped you the most to move forward with your life?

## CHAPTER 20: Sheba’s rebellion; a wise woman’s intervention

“*Listen to what your maid servant has to say.*” (v.17)

Sheba, from the tribe of Benjamin (Saul’s tribe) seeks to cash in on the bad feelings toward Judah and David. He sounds the horn and shouts: “*We have no portion in David....*” (v.1). Verse 2 tells us “*all the Israelites left David for Sheba.*”

**Verses 4-13—Amasa’s death.** In responding to Sheba’s rebellion, Amasa, whom David has chosen to replace Joab, proves to be ineffective. David bypasses Joab again and appoints Abisai to replace Amasa. But Joab has decided not to be left out of the battle, so he heads off as well in pursuit of Sheba. Along the way, he meets Amasa whom he probably

resents very much. He reaches out to Amasa as if to kiss him but instead stabs him to death. As far as Joab is concerned, Amasa should never have replaced him.

Without blinking an eye, Joab races on with his men after Sheba who, by this time, are holed up in the city of Abel (vv 14-15). Joab and his soldiers are about to knock down the walls of the city when a wise woman intervenes (v.16). The woman wants to save the city, so she negotiates with Joab. She reminds him that Abel is an old and venerated city. *“This challenge to Joab is a voice that is peaceful and faithful in Israel, a mothering voice that speaks for a mothering city.... The raging intent of Joab is broken by the compelling voice of this woman”* (Brueggemann).

Joab listens to the woman. He will be happy to save the city if the traitor Sheba is handed over. Sheba is delivered to Joab and killed. The wisdom of the nameless woman prevails. The city is saved, the rebellion is ended. Joab has once again helped David save his throne.

**Pause:** What do you think motivated Joab to remain loyal to David, despite David’s poor treatment of him?

#### **APPENDICES: Chapters 21 - 24**

It is the common view of scholars that these final chapters of 2 Samuel are an interruption to the story of David which continues in 1Kings 1-2.

In these chapters, we find:

- two narratives (21:1-14, 24:1-25)
- two songs (22:1-51, 23:1-7)
- two lists (21:15-22, 23:8-39)

#### **CHAPTER 21: Gibeonites are avenged**

*“You must not go into battle with us again, lest you quench the lamp of Israel.”* (v.17)

The grisly incident recorded here is repellent to us and shakes up our image of David as a man of *hesed* (Hebrew word for mercy).

Behind this story are ancient religious beliefs that natural disasters, like the famine, are the result of sin. The famine is interpreted as a consequence of Saul’s illegal slaughtering of the Gibeonites (an incident not recorded in the Bible). Such sin must be atoned for in order to restore balance to nature. Two sons and five grandsons are executed to make atonement for the

sins. Another interpretation holds that David’s action is a way for him to send a strong message to Saul loyalists that any form of rebellion against him will not be tolerated. David does a ruthless thing and attempts to give a religious reason for it.

**Verses 15-22** recount battles against Israel’s old enemy, the Philistines. David is saved from death by Abishai. The soldiers then decide that the aging David must not go into battle anymore. His death would mean the *“quenching of the lamp of Israel”* (v.17).

#### **CHAPTER 22: Song of thanksgiving**

*“O Lord, my rock, my fortress my deliverer....”* (v.2)

If we read Psalm 18, we will see that this song of thanksgiving is very similar to it. Like most psalms, its language is pictorial and could be applied to a variety of situations in which God’s help is recognized and acknowledged. In his introductory remarks to the song, Walter Brueggemann writes:

*“The song provides a theological context in which the whole of the literature of I and II Samuel is to be understood. The history of David (and of Israel) is not simply a tale of power and conflict but concerns the enactment of Yahweh’s sovereignty. The dominant theme of this literature is deliverance by Yahweh, for which Israel is profoundly grateful. Israel was able to see that it was by David’s hand that deliverance was wrought in Israel. Israel also knows, however, that beyond David, the real agent of deliverance is always and everywhere the God of Israel (cf. I Sam. 14:34-37). It is for this reason that this song of deliverance (cf. vv 1, 18, 44) was readily taken up for David”* (ibid. p.339).

We might read the song as David, towards the end of his life, looking back over God’s goodness to him. David recognizes that in the midst of all his troubled waters, God is with him as his rock and protector. The only part of the song that might bother us a bit is verses 21-25 where David makes a reference to his sinlessness. We know differently. Commenting on these verses, David Payne writes: *“David is not so much claiming personal sanctity but confirming as king he has maintained the laws of the covenant to the best of his ability, and brought the nation into humble obedience to them.”*

**Pause:** What speaks to you most in David’s psalm of thanksgiving?

## CHAPTER 23: David's last words

*"The spirit of the Lord spoke through me: his word was on my tongue."* (v.2)

These "last words" of David begin in the style of the oracles of Balaam (Num 24:3-4, 15-16). After describing himself as one raised up, anointed and favored by God, the writer attributes his words to the spirit of the Lord (v.2). A just and God-fearing ruler is compared to morning light playing on the wet grass. Verse 5 speaks of God's eternal covenant with David (2Sam 7), who has seen salvation and the fulfillment of every desire (vv 5-6). In contrast, the wicked are dangerous to the touch and like thorns destined for the fire. *Verses 8-36—David's heroes.* These verses list a group of outstanding warriors who were very loyal to David.

## CHAPTER 24: David sins and repents

*"I have sinned grievously in what I have done. But now, Lord, forgive the guilt of your servant, for I have been very foolish."* (v.10)

The final chapter of the books of Samuel contains a problematic opening verse: *"The Lord's anger against Israel flared again, and he incited David against the Israelites by prompting him to number Israel and Judah"* (v.1).

Later in the chapter, David and the nation will be severely punished for obeying what seemed like God's wish. While it is stated that God is the one who "incited" David to take up the census, why is it that he and the nation are punished for their obedience?

In this chapter, two events occur: David takes up a census of men eligible for military service. Shortly after, pestilence descends upon the land.

In the ancient world, there was no distinction between primary and secondary causes. The belief was that God caused everything. Later on, people would come to see that God *permits* but does not *cause* evil. While this story claims that God incited David to take the census, 1Chronicles 21 blames Satan. The phrase "God incited David" is much like the phrase "God hardened the Pharaoh's heart"—which we know he did not. Rather, God allowed Pharaoh to harden his heart against him.

We may wonder why taking up a census was such a bad thing. It was seen as an act of pride on the part of David in choosing to place his trust in his army

rather than in God. Even Joab feared angering the Lord by counting Israel's fighting forces (v.3).

**Verses 10-17—David repents.** We are not told how, but David does come to recognize that taking up the census was a bad thing and offended God. Once he recognizes his wrongdoing, he sincerely repents. This is one of the most admirable qualities of David—his willingness to recognize his mistakes and repent. We will see in the books of Kings that Solomon does not have the same spirit of repentance.

For disobeying God, David has to choose one of three punishments. He opts for the shortest but the most intense. When the angel sent to administer the punishment is about to strike Jerusalem, David pleads with him to stop. Verse 16 says: *"The Lord regretted the calamity..."* These words are intended to underline God's mercy, to show God's love in the midst of trial.

**Verses 18-25—Sacrifice of atonement.** The books of Samuel end with David offering a sacrifice to God for his sin. The prophet Gad tells David to build an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah, a non-Israelite. But first David must purchase the threshing floor for he *"cannot offer to the Lord holocausts that cost nothing"* (v.24). The place where David offers his sacrifice will in time become the location where Solomon will build his temple.

**Concluding remarks** In its epilogue to 2Samuel, *The Collegeville Bible Commentary—Old Testament* states: *"The Lord has satisfied the people with two important needs: a prophet to deliver the divine word and a king to govern them. These are the leaders by whom the Lord guides their history, punishing them or delivering them as required. God exacts obedience, loyalty, and gratitude, but does not abandon the sinner. The lives of all are bathed in God's goodness and love"* (p, 225).

**Pause:** At this point in the story, what are your thoughts and feelings about David?

## RESOURCES

- Interpretation Series—First and Second Samuel, Walter Breuggemann
- The Daily Study Bible Series – 1 & 2 Samuel, David Payne
- The Collegeville Bible Commentary—Old Testament
- The Catholic Bible—Personal Study Edition