

---

# The King's Great Grief

2 Samuel 18:1-33<sup>18</sup>

*Russ Kennedy*

God's people have strengths and weaknesses...

God's people struggle with heart idols and sins...

God's people are chastened by God to deal with weaknesses and with sins...

David is an example of all this. He has weaknesses and heart idols. Both of these were wrapped up in his son, Absalom. Interwoven with this is God's chastening of David over his sins against Uriah and with Bathsheba.

Now this all comes to a climax in the story of our text...

As a student of the Word, I am interested in the wonderful structures of these narratives. The structure helps us to see the flow and emphasis.

Protecting Absalom (v. 1-5)

    Completing the Victory (v. 6-8)

        Absalom the Rebel, Executed (v. 9-15)

            The Resolution (v. 16-18)

                The Runners (v. 19-23)

            David the King, Expecting (v. 24-27)

        Communicating the Victory (v. 28-32)

    Grieving Absalom (v. 33)

---

<sup>18</sup> Unless otherwise designated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

## Protecting Absalom (v. 1-5)

David and his leaders begin the preparation for the battle.

<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.

### *Its Army (v. 1-2)*

David musters a large army of loyal men. He creates three armies placing them under three commanders. Joab, his brother Abishai and the trusted foreigner, Ittai are placed in command of each of the armies. In this way, if one is defeated it does not hand over the kingdom to the rebels. It will allow them more mobility and to fight on multiple fronts.

### *Its Objection (v. 3)*

David declares that he will go out with them. Now, this is commendable but not wise. The objection the commanders put forth is wise. If David is captured or killed, then Absalom will have gained the primary objective that Ahithophel counseled. It would be better to fill out the ranks from the soldiers assigned to defend the city so that they can go against Absalom with maximum force.

### *Its Review (v. 4)*

David sees the wisdom of what he is advised. He knows what Hushai has advised Absalom so he agrees to abide by the counsel of the commanders. David stands at the gate reviewing the army as it passes out of the city to march

### *Its Orders (v. 5)*

David gives an order to his commanders. He commands them to "deal gently with Absalom." In other words, he can be captured but he is not to be tortured or killed. This order was directed to Joab, Abishai and Ittai, but was in the hearing of all. David's heart was more concerned for the safety of his rebellious son than he was for the protecting and securing of the kingdom God had given him. He also seems to ignore the unhelpful effect protecting the enemy has on the morale of his commanders and soldiers.

## Completing the Victory (v. 6-8)

All prepped, organized and equipped, David's army takes the field.

<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.

### *The Terrible Slaughter (v. 6-7)*

Once again we are seeing the elite trained soldiers under experienced leadership go against what are called "the men of Israel." The difference between the professional army of David and the vast horde of lesser trained, lesser able civilians is being contrasted. The result is pretty predictable. Absalom's army is slaughtered losing twenty thousand men in one day.

### *The Great Forest (v. 8)*

David's army chose the forests of Ephraim in Gilgal to engage the enemy. The men of Israel were scattered into small unit engagements all throughout the forest. The forest was so dense and the terrain so dangerous that more died as a result in the forest than died to the edge of the sword and spear.

## Absalom the Rebel, Executed (v. 9-15)

This anticipates what happened to Absalom.

<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.

***Its Situation (v. 9)***

What a strange turn of events. The proud Absalom is fleeing the battle on a mule. As befits his status as warrior-king he would have ridden a horse or a chariot into the battle. But his forces have been routed and are on the run. As he rides through the forest, his head gets caught in the branches of an oak. Many have said it was his long hair that caught him. At least as our narrator records it, is likely that he was looking behind him and was rammed into the fork of the tree with enough force that he was unable to extricate himself.

Now he hangs there, helpless. He can't call for help. He can't get down. He is hanging alive between heaven and earth. It is painful and shameful.

***Its Objection (v. 10-13)***

Absalom's plight was seen and reported. Joab is astonished that the soldier did not kill Absalom – in fact, Joab was prepared to pay a bounty. The young man rightly refused no matter what the bounty might be. He reminds Joab what the king's orders were. Besides, he doesn't trust Joab to back him if he had killed Absalom. Joab's reputation for ruthlessness is well known.

***Its Accomplishment (v. 14-15)***

Joab and his 10 armor bearers go to Absalom is hanging, still alive. With total disregard for the king's orders, he mercilessly runs three javelins through Absalom's heart while he is hanging there defenseless. Emboldened by their commander's actions, the armor bearers also hack at Absalom so that he dies.

Why would Joab do this? Joab has shown that he cares more for the kingdom and regency that he does for the king. He had done what the king required and ended up an accomplice in the murder of good soldier, Uriah. Now, the king's command is shielding a dangerous rebel. He believes the order is foolish. He has seen the king fail to deal with Absalom. He advocated for bringing Absalom back to the court and so feels responsible. And this one wicked young man's vile aspiration has now led to the slaughter of 20,000 men. It is frankly easy to hear the rationalization that leads him to kill the enemy of the kingdom and the king lest more mischief, grief and loss follow. Ending his life meant ending the troubles.

***The Resolution (v. 16-18)***

Now that the leader of the rebellion is dead, it is time to bring all to a close...

<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.

### ***The Cessation of Hostilities (v. 16)***

Joab blows the recall horns. David's army leaves off the pursuit and regathers. There has been enough slaughter. Nothing more will be achieved. With Absalom dead the pursuit at this point is senseless and may be undermine a future peace.

### ***The Burial of Absalom (v. 17)***

Absalom is buried in a pit with stones piled on it. The idea is to prevent his burial place from being some kind of rallying point. The pit is a grave. The pile of stones prevents the scavengers from taking the body. And it still marks the place in case king David wants to do something.

### ***The Monument to Absalom (v. 18)***

All that would mark Absalom's vain glorious attempt to rise to power would a stile he has raised to his own name. This is the lasting marker to a vain and foolish and wicked son. No one raised a marker to his name. The monument he raised in his own name. A fitting pillar to an empty life since he has failed in his quest and no posterity, all of sons having died.

## **The Runners (v. 19-23)**

A footrace between a volunteer and a draftee...

<sup>19</sup> Then Ahimaaz 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." <sup>20</sup> 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." <sup>21</sup> Then Joab said to the Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have seen." The Cushite bowed before Joab, and ran. <sup>22</sup> Then Ahimaaz 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?" <sup>23</sup> "Come what may," he said, "I will run." So he said to him, "Run." Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the plain, and outran the Cushite.

### ***A Request (v. 19-20)***

Ahimaaz is the son of the priest, Zadok. His father is serving in Jerusalem at great risk. This young man volunteers to take the news of the victory to David. But Joab denies his request. He will not let him go because the news includes the death of Absalom.

Joab may be concerned about what will happen to him if he reports the news of Absalom's death. Remember what happened to the messenger who reported the deaths of Saul and Jonathan? Will David react to the news of Absalom's death as he did with the news of Jonathan's death? Well, maybe if Joab were delivering the news...

***An Assignment (v. 21)***

But maybe a foreigner will be more expendable or maybe acceptable. So Joab turns to a young African (yes, Cushites were from Africa) and sends him to run to king David with the news. The young man takes off toward the city of Mahanaim where David is sitting in the gate. He seems to have a route along the hillsides.

***A Plea (v. 22-23)***

Ahimaaz pleads to also run with the news. We are not sure why he is so insistent other than he may feel like he is the best to present both the victory of the army and the death of the son. Joab implies that Ahimaaz is doing this for the reward he may receive. Joab was offering a bounty for Absalom dead or alive. He is thinking in terms of money. Ahimaaz doesn't care. It seems his care is for his king. So he takes off. But he is not content to follow. He takes a path that leads through the valley of Gilead and he outruns the Cushite.

What a drone cam scene this is. Along the upper ridge the Cushite is running with the news. In the valley runs Ahimaaz lengthening his gait and arriving first in fields before city.

***David the King, Waiting (v. 24-27)***

King David is sitting in the gate with a watchman station in the tower watching for the news...

<sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> 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." <sup>27</sup> The watchman said, "I think the running of the first is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok." And the king said, "He is a good man and comes with good news."

***His Location (v. 24)***

There is something poignant about David being where he is. He wanted to go to the war. But he has followed the counsel he received. But here he sits, waiting to hear the news of the battle. I am sure his heart is dreading the news of his son as well.

***His Interaction (v. 25-27)***

The watchman sees the first runner coming. David knows that since he is alone, he is bringing news. When the second runner is seen, David thinks that they are bringing different news.

### ***His Expectation (v. 27)***

The watchman recognizes the running of Ahimaaz. Ahimaaz must have been famous as a runner and his style well known. Ah, a good man must be bringing good news.

## **Communicating the Victory (v. 28-32)**

So two runners with news for the king and the kingdom.

### ***Of the Battle's Victory (v. 28-30)***

Ahimaaz arrives first with his news.

<sup>28</sup> Then Ahimaaz 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." <sup>29</sup> And the king said, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent the king's servant, your servant, I saw a great commotion, but I do not know what it was." <sup>30</sup> And the king said, "Turn aside and stand here." So he turned aside and stood still.

Ahimaaz tells the truth, but is subtle. His message announces the victory. But David asks specifically about Absalom. He does not ask about his troops. He does not ask about the rebels. He is concerned about the "young man Absalom." Ahimaaz knows the Cushite is coming and so equivocates and leaves the bad news for the Cushite to deliver.

### ***Of the Battle's Victim (v. 31-32)***

The Cushite arrives with his good news.

<sup>31</sup> 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." <sup>32</sup> 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."

Same good news. Same Absalom focused question. The Cushite responds with what has to be a powerfully convicting answer. "May all of your enemies, may all who rebel against you, may all who mean you evil, be like Absalom." It is a response, a report and a rebuke all rolled into one. The skillful answer of the Cushite tells us why he was near to Joab and possibly one of his armor bearers.

## **Grieving Absalom (v. 33)**

We are moved by David's grief.

<sup>33</sup> And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

### ***Its Experience***

David's soul is grief stricken. He goes up to the room in the gate tower to be alone. There he weeps. He may be king, but he is still a father. His son may be a rebel, but he still loves him.

### ***Its Expression***

But what he says next betrays a heart that has gone beyond a God-pleasing love for his son. You hear the grief that comes from a broken heart, a heart that has put too much weight on the relationship. It is right to grieve the loss of even rebellious children. But to be overwhelmed with grief does not commend the grace of God to others.

---

## **Reflect and Respond**

The grief of David may be fueled by a love for his wayward son that is not pleasing to God. But it does point us to the perfect love of God that grieves over the sinning and the wayward. We see that as Jesus weeps over Jerusalem expressing His grief over Israel's rejection and rebellion. While David's love for a rebellious son is mixed with self and sin, God's love for us is pure, perfect and powerful.

How do we think about Joab's disobedience to the King's command? Is he right in killing Absalom? Yes, to permit the enemies of the Lord and the king to survive and thus endanger the kingdom again is not wise. Yet, the right thing to do is also the wrong thing to do. The king has ordered his commanders to go easy on Absalom. If the King's command is wrong, is Joab obligated to obey? Since it is the king who has given the command, whether it is wise or foolish, Joab is supposed to obey? The general principle in the Scripture is this: obey an authority unless they command you to sin or their command itself is sin. This principle makes both the king wrong in protecting the life of the rebel, even if it is his son. And Joab should not have disobeyed David and should have entrusted the results to the Lord.

How do you respond to wayward children? Is there anger and attempts at control? Is there an unwillingness to address their sins unless you "drive them away?" Has your love for your children become idolatrous? How would we know? The best test I know is when you will overlook their sin and not deal with them or when you will shield older children from the consequences of their choices. We see David doing both. We know the Lord never does that.

Finally, like King David, the Lord will reign over His enemies. They may rebel for a season. They may take strategic places, but in the end God will prevail. Let this be a warning and a comfort to you.

When you face loss, grieve in a way that is pleasing to God. See and heed the counsel of others. May our own sadness in times of loss not bring sadness to the Spirit who has been placed in us.



