
The Kings' Shameful Flight

2 Samuel 15¹⁵

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History has been full of betrayals and rebellions. They often have soldiers and servants who turn on their king. But this rebellion is led by a son, a much loved, much idolized son.

The beginnings of the rebellion:

A - Absalom seeks to end his exile...

B - The involving of Joab...

C - Demands that he come...

c - Directs his message...

b- The ingratiating himself to the king...

a - Absalom seeks to end David's rule...

"After this..." our story begins.

Absalom's Conspiracy to become King (v. 1-12)

Absalom carefully executes his conspiracy to overthrow his father, the anointed King.

To Develop a Following (v. 1-6)

He begins by working to gain a following.

¹ **After this** Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him. ² 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," ³ Absalom would say to him, "See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you." ⁴ 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." ⁵ 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. ⁶ Thus Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

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We are familiar with this kind of political scene. Here is a tall, handsome man, putting himself up in front of people. He has the trappings of power and prestige. He is creating a kingly image. When he moves about the city, people will know. If he can have their eyes, he will eventually gain their hearts. As one author said, "Absalom understood the mystique of monarchy. He gave the people a glittering parade whenever he went out in public." [Keddie, p.141]

Absalom wins the hearts and favor of the people by subverting the judicial decisions of the kings appointed judges. He would meet people early in the morning who were waiting at the gate where the courts were held. These people came early to be first in line to get a decision on a suit or an issue. No judge or servant of the king is there. But Absalom is. He would always side with the claim, telling the person what he would do if he were the king or the judge. He would be a better king than they have now.

He showed how friendly, approachable – near to the people he was. . He acknowledged people in a way that made them feel good. After all, this was the king's son. His attentions drew out people's hearts to him.

And so he won the people's love and loyalty away from his father and to himself.

To Deceive the King (v. 7-9)

⁷ 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. ⁸ 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.' " ⁹ The king said to him, "Go in peace." So he arose and went to Hebron.

Absalom has a long habit of deceitful plotting. Now he has been plotting and politicking in Jerusalem for four years. His plans now will take himself out of the city to work on winning the tribes.

He has come to despise his father and what his father stands for. He knows King David loves and serves the Lord. So Absalom is putting a spiritual face on it to win the favor of his father, the king. There is no indication that Absalom made any such vow to the Lord. This is a lie to his father. He wants to go to Hebron where he will gather the people to rebel.

Keddie helpfully notes, "We cannot assume that any such vow was made, for both the tenor of Absalom's character and the oh-so-convenient way in which this seven or eight-year-old vow fitted into his bid for the throne suggest it to be a stratagem rather than an exercise in personal piety." {Keddie, p.142}.

Sadly, David does not appear to suspect anything. For four years Absalom has been subverting the hearts of the people *right under David's nose*. But David is blinded by his idolatrous love for his son. He has indulged Absalom over and over again. Now, the pretense of spirituality totally fools him.

To Declare himself King (v. 10-12)

¹⁰ 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!’ ” ¹¹ With Absalom went two hundred men from Jerusalem who were invited guests, and they went in their innocence and knew nothing. ¹² 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.

From Hebron, Absalom prepared to declare himself king. He has a multi-pronged attack.

He secretly stationed people in all the tribes to make the declaration at the right moment. So in each of the tribal centers Absalom placed an envoy, a messenger, who would declare that Absalom was king in Hebron when the trumpets were sounded. At the same moment, all across the nation, Absalom would be proclaimed the king.

He gathered two hundred prominent people from Jerusalem to join him in Hebron. They were not a part of the conspiracy because our author says that did not know what was going on. But their presence is going to add legitimacy to his claim. They were pawns in Absalom’s clever machinations. They were caught in web. If they opposed Absalom, they risked retaliation. However, if they supported him they would be guilty of treason against the king and could be punished if the rebellion failed. Absalom had put them in a position that no matter what they did, David would assume they were there in support of the rebellion. [adapted from Keddie, p.143]

Finally, Absalom offered sacrifices, once again pretending to have God’s approval. And he summoned David’s trusted counselors, Ahithophel. Ahithophel comes, not under duress, but as one who betrayed his king. He appears in David’s lament in **Psalm 41:9** “Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.” This betrayal foreshadowed the dark betrayal of Jesus, the true king.

As a result the conspiracy gathered strength and increased in size.

David's Flight from the City of Jerusalem (v. 13-29)

David is informed of the rising rebellion. He prepares to flee from the city. That he flees in the face of his son raises some questions about motivations.

Is this the right thing to do? IS it the wise thing to do? Is he seeking to spare the city? Is he bowing to God’s chastening in fleeing? Is this simply another evidence of David’s weakness in regards to his sons? Why doesn’t he fight for what God has given him? He is God’s anointed king. Absalom is a usurper and a rebel. Why not muster his army, go out, and take Absalom and the rebellious leadership? Watch this unfold keeping our focus on what the text says.

Or is this a wise and strategic retreat? Is he trading time for space? Is he trying to keep the fight against his son from being a siege of his beloved city? Is there a humbled, repentant submission to God's chastening providence?

The temptation in the text is to focus primarily on David's flight and not see the emphasis of the author on David's interaction with people. But there is an image in the author's eye of David going down from Jerusalem and then going up the Mount of Olives. This same movement is evident in the gospels when Jesus leaves Jerusalem and goes up the Mount of Olives in the hours before his being arrested and crucified.

The Humble Servants (v. 13-17)

David is surrounded by wonderful, humble servants who are poised to do the king's will.

¹³ And a messenger came to David, saying, "The hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom." ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ And the king's servants said to the king, "Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever my lord the king decides." ¹⁶ So the king went out, and all his household after him. And the king left ten concubines to keep the house. ¹⁷ And the king went out, and all the people after him. And they halted at the last house.

Who warn David

The messengers and servants bring the news of the danger of the uprising. Because of Absalom's strategies, it appears that a large majority of the people support the rebellion. They want to warn him but it seems aren't advising flight.

David's response is to gather up his large household and prepare leave the city. In his words we hear his heart.

He is afraid that there will be no escape. He thinks of Jerusalem, not as a place of refuge to defend but as a place of entrapment to escape. And so he is willing to leave the city of God and allow it to be taken by the usurper.

He does not want the ruin of his household and the destruction of the people of the city. He gathers up his household and all who would go with him to safety.

He will need time to prepare his army. Who will be loyal? Who will go over to Absalom? Who can he trust at this point?

He leaves ten concubines to care for the palace. They were keep everything clean and in order. There was much to do. But this decision led to terrible trouble and fulfilled prophecy.

Who go with David

And so they prepare to depart from the city. This is no panicked, disorderly flight. This is carefully ordered. It is a stately exit. They go in a column. They stop at the last house near the gate. There is sense of a dramatic pause. It is almost all are looking back up the street to the palace and to the tabernacle. They will return.

The Loyal Followers (v. 18-23)

Our author zooms the camera in on the passing parade to show us loyal followers.

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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." ²¹ 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." ²² 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. ²³ 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.

Who commit to David (v. 18-20)

Some of those who followed David are quite surprising. It is easy for us to pass over the "___ites" and not understand what is being said here. The first two are part of his inner circle of foreign mercenaries. These two groups are not Israelites. They are Gentiles. They have taken up service in the king's army. They are prepared to stand with him.

The six hundred are Gentiles who met and began to follow and serve David when he was in Gath fleeing from Saul. So these are Philistines. They are led by Ittai. They may have been Jewish proselytes. But they had only arrived the day before. I suspect that they heard of the threat against David and are here to serve and save the king. David offers them a release to return to their city or their homes.

Who go with David (v. 21-23)

Like all the servants and soldiers who committed to the king, they will go out with the king. In a great affirmation of love and loyalty to David, these Gentiles, Philistine warriors swear that they will serve the true anointed king through life or death. There will be no comforts of city and home and peace. They will follow the king through dangers and difficulties and maybe even death. Where the king goes, they will go. And they do and *all their little ones*. Imagine...

This is true love and loyalty to the true anointed King. Do we have such in our own hearts to Jesus?

The Submissive Levites (v. 24-29)

So the Gentile soldiers who will serve the king, pass by. Behind them are the Levites and the Ark of the covenant.

²⁴ 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. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ But if he says, 'I have no pleasure in you,' behold, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him." ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ See, I will wait at the fords of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me." ²⁹ So Zadok and Abiathar carried the ark of God back to Jerusalem, and they remained there.

Who bring the Ark (v. 24)

Abiathar, the high priest is at the head. Zadok is there with ALL the Levites and the Ark. They know who the true king is. The Ark should go with true king. There is no question in their mind of remaining behind. Absalom has no right to the visible presence of God nor the holy service of the priests.

Who hear the Command (v. 25-27)

But David is not going to do what Absalom has done. HE is not going to take the Ark with him and use it either as a talisman in battle or as an authentication that God is with him. The Ark and priests should stay in the city. But there is role for Zadok and his sons.

Who return the Ark (v. 28-29)

David sends them back to serve the Lord with the Ark. But he also sends them back to serve the king as informers. They will stay in the city with ears and eyes open. David will insure that any information, any intel that they can gather, the can bring to the river crossing at the edge of the wilderness.

David's Ascent of the Mount of Olives (v. 30-37)

The evocative picture here points us to an evening in the last hours of Jesus' life.

The Betrayal of Ahithophel (v. 30-31)

³⁰ 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. ³¹ 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."

God was dealing with David according to his word through Nathan. We see that promise of chastening unfolding here. Absalom was the evil from his own household. David had certainly contributed to the hatred and rebellion in Absalom's heart. But what explains Athithopel's betrayal? Why would he side with the rebellious son? Later, our author reminds us that Ahithophel was Bathsheba's grandfather and Solomon's maternal great grandfather. (2 Samuel 23:34, 39; 11:3). Did he secretly resent David's seduction of his granddaughter? Did he see Solomon as illegitimate? Whether we have real insight into heart motives, we do know that David saw the consequences and the chastening for his sin in these troubles. He understood that behind it all was the sovereign, good and wise God who was working to humble him and bring him to a deeper trust in the Lord.

So David walks in humility – barefoot, weeping, clothes torn. He bowed but not broken. He is submissive to God but ready to stand, if God wills, to defend the kingdom. Up the mount of Olives he goes among his loyal servants and soldiers.

When the news comes of Ahithophel's betrayal, David turns to God. He prays asking God to turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness. And the answer comes almost immediately...

The Assignment for Hushai (v. 32-37)

The narrator is clearly connecting David's prayer with Hushai.

³² 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. ³³ David said to him, "If you go on with me, you will be a burden to me. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ 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." ³⁷ So Hushai, David's friend, came into the city, just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem.

The friend of David, Hushai, meets David at the summit of Olives where the Olivet Alter was located. He has come grieving for David and the situation. He will go with David. But no, David humorously says, no – Hushai will be a burden but not if he goes back to the city. So Hushai is to insinuate himself into Absalom's household as a mole. The priests will be the conduits for the intel Hushai gleans.

Oh what a scene. Hushai arrives back at the city just as Absalom enters. The picture the narrator draws is magnificent. There at the city gate, the son who is a traitor and the Gentile who is a loyal servant meet.

What will follow...?

Reflect and Respond

People who want to overthrow leadership often follow the same scheme as Absalom. (1) Get people on your side. (2) Deceitfully affirm loyalty and even spirituality and (3) create an alternative leadership that eventually removes the old.

Let me close with a Psalm, written when he fled from Absalom. **Psalm 3:1–8**

A PSALM OF DAVID, WHEN HE FLED FROM ABSALOM HIS SON.

¹ O LORD, how many are my foes!

Many are rising against me;

² many are saying of my soul,

there is no salvation for him in God. *Selah*

³ But you, O LORD, are a shield about me,
my glory, and the lifter of my head.

⁴ I cried aloud to the LORD,

and he answered me from his holy hill. *Selah*

⁵ I lay down and slept;

I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.

⁶ I will not be afraid of many thousands of people
who have set themselves against me all around.

⁷ Arise, O LORD!

Save me, O my God!

For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;
you break the teeth of the wicked.

⁸ Salvation belongs to the LORD;

your blessing be on your people! *Selah*