

Walking by Faith When You Don't Know the End of the Story

2 Samuel 17:1-29

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Turn with me if you would to 2 Samuel chapter 17. 2 Samuel chapter 17. David, King David, has fled the city of Jerusalem. His son, Absalom, has declared himself king in Hebron and he is making his way toward the city. And David fled. Along the way, he was provided with some food from an unexpected source — a man by the name of Ziba. And he was called a few names by another individual along the way. And David finds himself now encamped on the west side of the river Jordan, east of Jerusalem, almost at the point where the Jordan River spills into the Dead Sea — a place notorious for caves and so on, which we'll see in a moment, may have some significance.

Absalom has been counseled by Ahithophel, one time closest advisor to King David, but has now defected over to Absalom. Ahithophel, you should bear in mind, is Bathsheba's grandfather and possibly and probably bears ill-will toward David ever since the Bathsheba incident. It is Ahithophel who suggests to Absalom the incident, or can we call it, the “roof-top incident” with the tent and the concubines. What David had done in secret, Absalom does in public to David's concubines. If that's not revenge on Ahithophel's part, I'm not sure what is. It was bad counsel. You remember David had prayed a prayer that Ahithophel's counsel would come to nothing. It was bad counsel. Absalom should have pursued David while he was vulnerable. He's already lost a significant military advantage.

And now in this chapter, we will encounter Ahithophel and a man by the name of Hushai, who is David's spy in Absalom's camp. And the thing that we need to ask ourselves as we read this passage is the question that we always have to ask ourselves when we're reading historical narrative in the Old Testament: How is the promise of God - the promise of God with regard to His kingdom, the promise that Samuel had said that the kingdom was being taken from the hands of Saul and being given into the hands of David - how is that promise going to be fulfilled? Can God and His Word and His covenant be trusted when you find yourself in a very dark and difficult place?

You know we're reading a story now that's 3,000 years ago and maybe for the History Channel, but no, this is God's Word, this is God's infallible, inerrant Word, that as Brad has just reminded the little children tonight, is able to make us wise

unto salvation, is profitable for doctrine and reproof and correction and instruction in the way of righteousness that the man of God, that you and me, might be furnished for every good work. Well, as we turn to 2 Samuel chapter 17, let's pray together.

Father, we thank You again for the Scriptures. Thank You that this Word is quick and alive and sharper than any two-edged sword, dividing asunder the joints of the marrow, the soul of the spirit. Have Your way with us tonight again. Holy Spirit, come and show us again what it means to trust in the Lord God Omnipotent, who rules and reigns. Help us in our individual struggles of faith to lay hold upon You and Your Word. Now bless us, we pray. And bless us as we read the Scripture together. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Hear the Word of God:

Moreover, Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue David tonight. 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, 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." And the advice seemed right in the eyes of Absalom and all the elders of Israel.

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

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

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." 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.

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.

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

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, brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, flour, parched grain, beans and lentils, 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."

Amen. May God bless the reading of His holy and inerrant Word.

Well, God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. We read in Daniel 2:44, "The God of heaven will set up a kingdom and it will stand forever." That is God's purpose. That's God's aim — to set up a kingdom that will stand forever. But if you were with David right now on the west side of the river Jordan, down by the Dead Sea, having fled the day before, the night before, from Jerusalem, your son has proclaimed himself king and for all you know they are coming down upon him in their thousands and it all may be over by the morning — how is God going to work out His plan? How is God going to fulfill His purpose? Watch God at work here. There are some extraordinary characters in this chapter and we'll talk about some of them for a few minutes tonight, but I want you to keep your eyes on what God is doing in this chapter because He is the same God, yesterday, today, and forever. This may be 3,000 years ago, this may be old covenant as opposed to new covenant, this may be in the land of Israel rather than Mississippi, but our God hasn't changed one wit and His purpose is the same.

Now the first thing I want us to see, you see it in the first fourteen verses, you see it in the counsel of Ahithophel. And what you see is that the providence of God, the providence of God, is sovereign. It's a sovereign thing. It rules. It governs. Now Ahithophel, Ahithophel was a legend in his own time. Look at the closing verse of the previous chapter. "So was all the counsel of Ahithophel esteemed, both by David and by Absalom." And how was it esteemed? In those days, the counsel that Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the Word of God. When Ahithophel spoke it was as though God was speaking. So what does he say? He says to Absalom, "You've got to move quickly. You've got to come by a surprise attack with overwhelming force and with a focused objective. You must gather twelve thousand men tonight and pursue him and kick him when he's down." That was good advice. That was militarily strategic and opportune advice. David was disorganized. He has no army. He has no food. Insufficient food, insufficient means of supplying his ramshackle bands that have left the city in a hurry. He hasn't even got pots and pans. That's what we see at the end of this chapter. Somebody comes and brings pots and pans and food. Ahithophel's advice was good advice. It was sound advice. It was militarily strategic advice, to go after David and to go after him hard and to kill him, and to do it in such a way that only David would be killed and all of the men with David would come back to Absalom and yield themselves once again to his rule and his reign. And Absalom and the elders like that advice. It was good advice.

And then, in verse 5, why does he do this? Absalom calls in Hushai. Hushai is David's spy. He's a double agent in Absalom's court. And Hushai now must give his advice. He's bold. He criticizes in the very opening line. "This time the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good." That's a brave thing to say about a man whose counsel was like that of a consultation with God. And Hushai says, "You know, Absalom, what you need to do is not stay in the city and let twelve thousand men go and just kill David, because it will never work, because where David has gone, down by the Dead Sea, it's just full of caves and if you go there

tonight you'll never find him. You'll never find where David is. And what's going to happen is that they'll hear you coming and pillage and war and death will take place and there will be a slaughter of your men. It's better by far to wait awhile and gather a vast army from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south." I think Hushai is appealing to Absalom's vanity, that he would lead this largest army that Israel has ever seen. And I think for a moment Absalom can see himself marching in triumph before these, not just ten thousand or twelve thousand, but hundreds of thousands of men.

And then the writer, the writer in verse 14 — you see, Hushai's advice is taken. Absalom and the elders, they believe Hushai's advice is better. It's not better. Militarily it was a poor strategy. You were losing the significance and the advantage of a surprise attack when a man is down. If you wait awhile, David will get organized, people will go over from Absalom to David. It's a much more difficult strategy, but for some reason Absalom buys it because he buys into the vanity of it.

But look at verse 14. Why did Absalom believe Hushai and not Ahithophel? "Because the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel so that the LORD might bring harm upon Absalom." God is in this. This is the providence of God. This is God at work. Now you understand, David didn't know that. David is unaware of that. The writer is saying after the fact here. He's inserting it for us to understand. Do you understand what's going on here? Keep your eyes focused upon the Lord. Watch Him. Watch Him work. Watch Him work in the court of Absalom, watch Him work in the counsel of Ahithophel, watch Him work in the counsel of Hushai, watch Him work as Absalom yields to vanity and God is in it, because God is sovereign, because God is determined to fulfill His promise. God is determined to bring in His kingdom. He is determined to fulfill every promise that He has made. "The king's heart is in the hands of the Lord like rivers of water He turns it whichever way He wants." That's our God. That's our God. The providence of God is a sovereign thing. It's a powerful thing.

But secondly, and you see it in verses 15 through 22, you see, not only do you see the sovereignty of providence, you see the hiddenness of providence. Let me explain what I mean. There are all kinds of things going on here. In order for David to know what it is that Ahithophel has said and Hushai has said, and Hushai knows that his counsel has been accepted but he doesn't yet know that Absalom may change his mind in the course of the next few hours, and accept, after all Ahithophel's advice and pursue after David, so David needs to cross the river Jordan. If he has any chance of success here, of surviving this, he must cross over by night the river Jordan and news needs to get to him.

And how does that news get there? The priests — Zadok and Abiathar. Two young men - Jonathan and Ahimaaz, runners. A woman, a woman who hides these two men because they've been seen and news of it has been reported to Absalom so these men must now be hidden in a well and she covers the well and

pretends to be doing something with grain. And when asked where the two young men are, she lies, and says that they're gone. "They're nowhere near here. They're gone." You've got priests and young men and a woman and man who owns this well, and in the middle of it all, a moral conundrum — I mean a whopper of a moral conundrum — because this woman tells an outright lie. There's, you know the story of the women giving — the midwives in Egypt. It is possible to interpret that passage in such a way that what the women said was not a lie but it was actually true that these women were giving birth so quickly that they gave birth before the midwives got there. That's a possible interpretation, but there's no way around this particular incident. This is not just a little porker, this is an outright, barefaced lie.

So let's, in the comfort of First Presbyterian Church pews, on this Spring Break Sunday evening with all the time in the world at our hands, let's think about this for a minute with a measure of detachment. No, you see, we can't do that because the lives of these two young men are at stake. This isn't a little discussion in Starbucks over a cup of coffee of the moral conundrum of the lie of necessity as it's called. Is there such a thing as a lie of necessity? Is there such a thing as a lie of utility or a lie of exigency? It's been called different things at different times. And it was Augustine, dear Augustine, that chopped it down and said it's wrong. The lie of necessity is wrong. It is never right to tell a lie. And the Church has gone with him. For a thousand years the Church went with Augustine and said there is never a case when a lie of necessity or a lie of utility or a lie of exigency is the correct thing to do.

It's not just the woman, you see. It's not just the fact that she tells a lie here. Hushai is a spy. His entire life is a lie. Everything that he does is a lie. He's pretending to be one thing when he's something else. That's what being undercover means. It's the same conundrum for policemen or FBI folk who go undercover and they pretend to be something else. Can a Christian do that? Can a Christian be a policeman and go undercover and pretend? Can you be in the FBI? Can you be a soldier, you know, in an act of war, and deliberately do something, not necessarily say something, but do something so as to make the impression that this is the truth when it isn't the truth? And who is there in here who's going to say that no such instance can possibly be right?

You know, when Hebrews commends Rahab for telling a lie about the spies, Hebrews commends her faith. The only thing we know about this woman, the only thing we know about this woman is that she told a lie. And Hebrews says she's a woman of faith. My dear friends, it takes extraordinary faith and courage, extraordinary faith and courage, to tell a lie and believe that it's the right thing to do, in that instance. Killing is wrong. To take a life is wrong, except in war. Or in Israel when an intruder came into the house and you beat him and he died as a consequence. You were just in doing so in Old Testament Israel. You're to keep the Sabbath except when the ox has fallen into the ditch and then it's okay to break it. You are to obey your parents but not when your parents tell you to do

something that is contrary to what God wants and says.

And I think here, in this instance, what would you do? What would you do? Two young men, hiding in the well, what are you going to say? This is not armchair ethics; this is not a paper that you've assigned to a seminary student on ethics. This is a matter of life or death. And in the midst of that kind of moral conundrum - you know when we talk about providence we want it to be clean. When God exercises His sovereignty it's clean! No, it's messy. It's so messy that it's full of deception and lies and in the midst of all that God is working out His purpose, a purpose that almost seems at that point to be hidden and obscured. If you were standing next to the woman as she was telling this boldfaced lie and you're saying, "This is God at work here. You know, this is God at work." But that's what this chapter is saying. Watch God at work in a fallen world, in a sinful world, in a world full of hatred and malice and people are out to get you.

But there's a third thing here. Not only the sovereignty of providence, and not only the hiddenness of providence. I'm not even sure what to call it — the surprises of providence. The surprises of providence. There's a little vignette at the end of chapter 17 about Absalom and his enthronement in Israel. We'll pass over that. We'll go back to David because David crosses over the Jordan River by night. And three characters — Rag, Tag, and Bobtail — who are these three characters? Shobi, who's an Ammonite - a pagan, Machir, who is a former Saul loyalist, and Barzillai, who's in his eighties — no disrespect meant. And they come with pots and pans and cheese and lentils and beans for soup and food and utensils and equipment that David and his men need because they're in the wilderness and they're hungry and they're tired.

And you know, what sort of God do we have? A God who takes care of the big things. You know, the overall big plan — no, a God who provides beans and lentils and cheese and pots and pans. Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that beautiful? A God who's concerned about, "Where am I going to get my next meal from? Where am I going to get something to cook some soup? Even if I find something, how am I going to cook it?" And along comes Rag, Tag, and Bobtail. These three individuals — a pagan, a man in his eighties, and a former Saul loyalist. Isn't the providence of God extraordinary, that God gets involved in the details, in the small things? He's not just a God of the big things, He's the God of the little small things.

You know I wonder if this is the occasion when David began to think in his head the words of Psalm 23 — "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies." I wonder if this is the moment that that thought came into his head in the wilderness. And there's a table and there's beans and lentil soup which you're going to have before you go to bed tonight. That's the kind of God we have. Let's pray together.

Father, You are the same God yesterday, today, and forever. The God who

brings to pass Your kingdom, but a God who's concerned about lentils and cheese. We thank You. We thank You for the sheer wonder and beauty of it all, that we are provided for even in the very details of our lives. Now bless us, at the close of this day, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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