

Enemy Territory

2 Samuel 16:1-23

By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)

Now turn with me if you would once again to 2 Samuel to chapter 16; 2 Samuel chapter 16. We continue to watch how David's sin with Bathsheba and Uriah seems to cast a shadow over these chapters. David is now on the run. Absalom has gone to Hebron to fulfill some kind of religious vow. Hebron, of course, was home territory for Absalom, and there he proclaims himself king. He begins this coup d'état, an overthrow of David's kingship. And David decides to leave the city just in the nick of time. You see the final verse of chapter 15 — “Hushai, David's friend, came into the city, just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem.”

On the way out of Jerusalem and up the Mount of Olives and heading eastward, David met three people who must have been a source, each one much have been a source of enormous encouragement to him. He met Ittai. You remember Ittai the Gittite, a Gentile, who pledges his total allegiance with David and his men. And then Zadok, the priest, the high priest, and it was also who David sends back into Jerusalem with the Ark of the Covenant. It must have been very encouraging to David to know that the Levites and the priests in the city were loyal to him. And then this man Hushai, whom David asks to do an extraordinarily difficult thing — to become a spy, to go back to Absalom's court and pretend to be one of Absalom's loyal men and to be eyes and ears for David. There are Christians in law enforcement and in the military for whom Hushai no doubt serves as an example.

Now as he flees eastward, and eventually he'll cross the river Jordan, David meets — we encounter not friends, but David's enemies. Two that David encounters and one that we see back in Jerusalem with Absalom. Now before we read this passage let's look to God in prayer.

Father we thank You for the Scriptures. Thank You for the providences in times past where holy men of old wrote as they were borne along by the Holy Spirit. We pray now tonight that as we read this chapter, that it is the very word of the Living God. Grant Your blessing we pray. Grant us illumination that we might read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Hear the Word of God:

When David had passed a little beyond the summit, Ziba the servant of

Mephibosheth met him, with a couple of donkeys saddled, bearing two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred bunches of raisins, a hundred of summer fruits, and a skin of wine. And the king said to Ziba, "Why have you brought these?" Ziba answered, "The donkeys are for the king's household to ride on, the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat, and the wine for those who faint in the wilderness to drink." And the king said, "And where is your master's son?" Ziba said to the king, "Behold, he remains in Jerusalem, for he said, 'Today the house of Israel will give me back the kingdom of my father.'" Then the king said to Ziba, "Behold, all that belonged to Mephibosheth is now yours." And Ziba said, "I pay homage; let me ever find favor in your sight, my lord the king."

When King David came to Bahurim, there came out a man of the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei, the son of Gera, and as he came he cursed continually. And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David, and all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. And Shimei said as he cursed, "Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless man! The LORD has avenged on you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned, and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood."

Then Abishai the son of Zeruah said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head." But the king said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruah? If he is cursing because the LORD has said to him, 'Curse David,' who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?'" And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, "Behold, my own sons seek my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite! Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. It may be that the LORD will look on the wrong done to me, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing today." So David and his men went on the road, while Shimei went along on the hillside opposite him and cursed as he went and threw stones at him and flung dust. And the king, and all the people who were with him, arrived weary at the Jordan. And there he refreshed himself.

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

Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, "Give your counsel. What shall we do?" 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." 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. 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.

So far, God's holy and inerrant Word.

Now we have three cameos tonight, three enemies. Ligon was reminding us this morning that the kingdom of God can often look disheveled, pitiful, persecuted in the presence of enemies and hostile forces, but the progress and triumph of the kingdom of God is never in doubt. That's what the lesson this morning, I hope you haven't forgotten it, but that was this morning's lesson. It seems so very appropriate because that's what this passage is about. David is God's king, whatever else David is, and David is a man and a frail man, and he's walking here in the pathway that follows repercussions of his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, but he is God's man; he is God's king; he is God's anointed king. This is God's kingdom and it can never fail.

Now as David has been encouraged by three people, it's either Ittai, Zadok and priests, and Hushai whom he has sent back as his eyes and ears in Absalom's court, he meets first of all a man by the name of Ziba. Now Ziba is Mephibosheth's servant. Actually he is Mephibosheth's farm manager. Mephibosheth was Jonathan's son, the grandson of King Saul. You remember when Saul and Jonathan died on Mount Gilboa in the immediate aftermath of that, the nurse that was carrying Mephibosheth as a little child, dropped him you remember and he became lame in his feet and David had sworn to Jonathan that he would take care of Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth has been brought into the city of Jerusalem. He's been given land, farming land, and this man Ziba is the farm manager - the one who looks after the property, the crops that belong to Mephibosheth. And he comes now with donkeys and food — bread and raisins and flasks of wine — and he gives all of this to David. He swears his allegiance to David.

David looks as though he's a little suspicious. He wants to know where is his master, his master's son, Saul's son, Mephibosheth. And it's at this point that Ziba tells what looks to be an outright lie. You'll learn later in chapter 19 that a different account of why Mephibosheth is not here. But David is only privy now to Ziba's account. And Ziba gives this account that Mephibosheth, on hearing of Absalom's coup d'état, made it known in the city that he was loyal to Saul and that God has restored to the kingship Saul's dynasty. Mephibosheth, according to Ziba then, has gone over to the other side, has gone over to Absalom. Now this

appears not to be the case and chapter 19 will make that clearer.

David immediately responds and grants to Mephibosheth's servant Ziba, all of Mephibosheth's land. It's all hypothetical of course that this stage there's nothing that Ziba could do. He must have thought that David would eventually succeed or else he would be inclined to stay in the city, otherwise he's with David. For some reason he thinks that David is going to succeed but that may be his plus side. That may be a mark of his piety. That may be a mark of Ziba's insight, but Ziba is looking after number one. You know, what is Zibaism? Zibaism is when you find yourself in a potential opportunity for promoting yourself, you will do it no matter what the cost to others. So he's willing to paint his master in the worst possible light so as to make him look better.

Now tell me you don't recognize this guy Ziba. He walks among us and at times he is us. When there's a little moment, when there's an opportunity to advance yourself or advance your cause or advance your name or your esteem, you ingratiate yourself to someone else at the expense of someone else. Ziba is manipulator. He puts himself at the very center and sees himself and his own future as the most important thing. Well, we'll come back to Ziba later in chapter 19.

Then a little further along David encounters, at a place called Bahurim — he's moving northeastward toward the Jordan River and he will cross the Jordan River to the other side — but he's come to Bahurim and there is this man, Shimei. He's up on a slight hill. He is cursing David. He's calling him names. He's accusing David of having blood on his hands. Not the blood of Uriah so much as probably the blood of Abner and Ish-bosheth, neither of whom have been killed by David and in those instances David was innocent. But here is a man who's convinced that David has blood on his hands and he's cursing David and he's throwing stones at David.

And David's relative, Abishai — Abishai is the oldest son of David's sister — and Abishai is evidently now a cadet of some kind in David's personal body guard and Abishai hears this man cursing and throwing stones and he has a solution — lop off his head! “Let me go over there and this sword will pierce his throat so quickly he won't know it until he sneezes!” That's Abishai's solution. He might have been justified and David would have been justified to have done that. It was a capital offense to curse the king. David could easily have justified that. This was a time of war. This was a time of civil war. If Abishai had done that, we would turn the page and say, “You know, one more killing. There's been plenty of them in this 1 and 2 Samuel. You know, one more death, one more funeral. And who's going to shed tears for this dog?”

But David does a remarkable thing. Look at verse 10. “The king said, ‘If he is cursing because the LORD has said to him, ‘Curse David,’ who then shall say, ‘Why have you done so?’” There's something going on here. Look again at verse

12. "It may be that the LORD will look on the wrong done to me" — now that's the ESV translation. There's a not so much a translation issue — Ligon had one of those this morning that he gently and easily went over — and I have a transmission problem that I'm also going to go over because it's way too difficult to explain. There is a tradition that says it's not, "the wrong done to me," so much that David is thinking of, but, "the wrong that he has done to others." That would be a much more difficult translation than the translation that the ESV has adopted and it may, it may well be the correct one.

Let's think about it just for a second. Here's David. He's on the run. He's a fugitive. He's the Lord's anointed king and he's running. It's like *déjà vu* all over again. He was running from Saul, now he's running from his own son, Absalom. And David reasons like this — "It may be that this man has every right to curse me," because I think David is beginning to get what God has been doing in David's life these past few chapters. Why has God been bringing David down and down and down? To get him to the point where he will write Psalm 51 and say, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love, according to Your abundant mercy. Blot out my transgressions; wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." And I think that God is doing something in David's soul in these providences that is bringing to his mind and to his heart that he deserves to be cursed. "Don't touch this man. Don't lob off this man's head. It may be that God has sent him to remind me of my sin."

Isn't that remarkable? You know it's remarkable for many reasons but it's remarkable if you try and put yourself in the context in which David now finds himself in. He's running; for all he knows Absalom's men — they're not — but for all he knows Absalom's men are just half an hour behind him and he has the stability, he has the wherewithal, he has the courage to think this profound theological thought as he interprets this providence. And he says, "This may be of God. This may be God's doing. God may be saying something to me here and I need to heed it and I need to listen to it." I find that just remarkable that in the midst of the most intense providence, the most intense persecution when difficulties are abounding in David's life, he has this wherewithal to put it all beneath the sovereign providence of God. That's a lesson, isn't it? That's an incredible lesson to learn in the midst of whatever trial, whatever difficulty, whatever problem you find yourself — like David in the presence of your enemies, surrounded by enemies, surrounded by difficulty and darkness — and David sees his life now under the canopy of the overruling providence of God and he's saying, perhaps David is saying, "You know I deserve to be cursed. That's what I deserve. What I want is mercy. Have mercy upon me, O Lord."

Do you know that God uses providence to teach you the Gospel? God uses all kinds of things in your life to bring you right down so that you can cry out for mercy. Sometimes when our heads are so filled with pride, God has to come and prick that balloon and you can sometimes hear the air escaping because you've been on such a plane that you've begun to think that you deserve this or that

from God. And God is teaching you to say you don't deserve anything except to be cursed. "I sent My Son and made Him a curse for you. What you need to do is to cry out for mercy." I find this extraordinary and I just can't help but think that God is really teaching David something here, teaching him something about the Gospel, teaching him something about salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

Well then there's a third cameo and now we go back. The curtain falls and we're in another scene. We're back in Jerusalem — same time but a different location. We're back in Jerusalem with Absalom and there's a little account of Hushai, you know, the spy, who says, "Long live the king!" I wonder what king he had in mind. I'm sure it was David. You know Absalom is saying, "Oh wonderful. He's come over to my side." But all he's saying is, "Long live the king!" and perhaps Hushai is thinking in his mind, "Long live David!" because he's David's man. He's David's eyes and ears. You know, here's a man of such tremendous faith and courage. I have no idea how you live as a spy. I've spoken to Christians, we've had students at the seminary who have lived this double life in the military. They can't tell me anything about it because they'd have to kill me. I have no idea how they do it. It takes enormous faith. It takes enormous strength and courage. I think you have to raise this man, Hushai. I'm sure David held him in his prayers because he was in such a vulnerable position.

But it's not Hushai now, it's Ahithophel. And you remember what, back in chapter 15 at verses 12 and again at verse 31 — look at verse 31. Previous chapter verse 31 — David says, when he hears that Ahithophel has gone over to Absalom, David says, "Please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness." You know who Ahithophel is, don't you? He's Bathsheba's grandfather. Now you want to see nepotism? Look at David's house. This is Bathsheba's grandfather. Who knows the dynamics? Who knows what grievances he has been nursing for years about David and his granddaughter? You know you love your daughters, but some of you, wait until you have granddaughters. And what you wouldn't do for them. David has sown this seed. He has no one else to blame for Ahithophel going over to Absalom than himself. And David has uttered a prayer. "Lord, turn his counsel into foolishness." Do you know what Ahithophel says to Absalom? No, it's okay, we're not going to go into it. We're going to skate over it.

Ligon was reminding me — I don't remember, was it this morning? It may have been Friday. I think it was this morning. Anyway, he was reminding me — no, it was Friday. We were talking about that book that he was recommending from the pulpit this morning about what went wrong and about Islam and the Middle East and North Africa and so on. And he was reminding us of a tale that's told in that book about Verdi, Giuseppe Verdi's, *Aida*. It was written for the Caliph of Egypt. The dedicatee of Verdi's *Aida* was an Egyptian. And the first performance was held in Cairo. Some of you know that in the plotline of *Aida* there is a man, the military commander, Radames, and Radames is in love with two women. One is an Ethiopian princess who's now a slave in Egypt, but he's also in love with the

Pharaoh's daughter. This is the whole plot. This is what *Aida's* about — a man who's in love with two people and it's a problem. And the dedicatee cannot see this as a problem at all. “Have both of them!”

Well, this is in part what's going on here. Absalom is told to take David's concubine. This is all Middle Eastern, now as much as then. This was the sign of having conquered and taken control of the king's palace. You have the concubines. Now, pass over all of that. It's sordid and it's not worth talking about. What should Ahithophel have said to Absalom? He should have said, “You go after David and you go after him with all of your might and all of your strength because he is at his most vulnerable right now. His men are in disarray. He has no armory. He has no horses. He has nothing. You can catch him before he reaches the Jordan and you can kill him.” You know I think if Ahithophel had said that, that's probably what would have happened. Instead, he allows David to cross the Jordan, to regroup, to get for himself all kinds of support so that when the final battle will come it's fairly even-sided. Ahithophel gave really bad advice. However you look at it, it was militarily catastrophic advice that he gave to Absalom.

God answered that little one line prayer of David's. It was a prayer thrown up into the wind. You know you've prayed prayers like that. I've prayed prayers like that. You're just caught off guard and you blurt something out like, I said one yesterday — my lips are said. I said a little prayer yesterday because I saw something was about to happen and it didn't. It was just a one line prayer, silent prayer. God answered David's prayer.

You know, turn with me — we'll close with this — but turn with me to Psalm 37. I sort of wonder - is this what David learned? Psalm 37, it's one of his psalms. “Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers! For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb.” Verse 5 — “Commit your way to the LORD; trust in Him, and He will act.” Do you want me to say that again? “Commit your way to the LORD; trust in Him, and He will act.” I think David was learning that right here. May we learn it too.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You again for the Scriptures. We find ourselves tonight desiring much of the same as David. We often find ourselves in the presence of enemies, of those who would ridicule the Christian faith, that they will come to nothing. Your kingdom will come because at the head of the kingdom there is a King, the Lord Jesus — the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who will triumph over sin and death and hell itself. So grant us the encouragement, O Lord, that comes from these pages and grant us faith to trust in You and to see You acting. We ask it in Jesus' name. 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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