

“O Absalom, Absalom!”

2 Samuel 18:1 - 19:8

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

Now turn with me if you would to 2 Samuel chapter 18. 2 Samuel chapter 18. David, as you will recall if you were able to be with us in the last few weeks, David has left the city of Jerusalem and is encamped now in a place called Mahanaim, which is east of Jerusalem across the river Jordan and down just where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea — a place with lots of caves. The reason he has done that of course is because his son, Absalom, who had been in Hebron, has declared himself to be king and is now occupying the palace in Jerusalem. Now because of the advice given to Absalom by Ahithophel, Absalom has lost the military advantage and instead of pursuing David and his men when they would have been at their most disorganized, he had instead spent an evening, you'll remember, on the rooftops with David's concubines.

Now let's turn to chapter 18, the chapter which records for us civil war. Before we read this passage let's look to God in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You for the Scriptures. We pray for these little children as they learn this catechism question tonight that they might grow up to love the Bible more than any other book, that they might become men and women of one book. Father, we pray tonight for the blessing of Your Holy Spirit. Without the illuminating work of the Spirit, we cannot understand, we do not see what it is that You desire for us to see and learn and apply. All Scripture is the product of Your out-breathing and is profitable for doctrine and reproof and correction and instruction in the way of righteousness. So grant tonight, again, that from Your Word there might be a word that would speak to our own hearts and our own lives. Help us not just to be readers, but help us to be doers of the Word. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.

This is God's Word:

Then David mustered the men who were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. 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." 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." 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. 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.

So the army went out into the field against Israel, and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. 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. The battle spread over the face of all the country, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword.

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. And a certain man saw it and told Joab, "Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak." 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." 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.' 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." 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. And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him.

Then Joab blew the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained them. 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. 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.

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." 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." Then Joab said to the Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have

seen." The Cushite bowed before Joab, and ran. 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?" "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.

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. 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. 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." 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."

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." 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." And the king said, "Turn aside and stand here." So he turned aside and stood still.

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." 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." 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!"

It was told Joab, "Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom" So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people, for the people heard that day, "The king is grieving for his son." And the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle. The king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!" Then Joab came into the house to the king and said, "You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who have this day saved your life and the lives of your sons and your daughters and the lives of your wives and your concubines, because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you. For you have made it clear today that commanders

and servants are nothing to you, for today I know that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants, for I swear by the LORD, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night, and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now." Then the king arose and took his seat in the gate. And the people were told, "Behold, the king is sitting in the gate." And all the people came before the king.

Well so far, God's holy and inerrant Word.

Now civil war, which is what we have here — David on one side, his son, Absalom on the other. By now, at least in terms of the battle, in numbers, almost equally matched. Civil war divides families. General Stonewall Jackson and General Robert E. Lee both had sisters devoted to the Union. Lee's sister had a son who fought for the Unionist cause against his uncle and no one in that family ever spoke to Lee again. Some of you know the book, *Knoxville 1863*, written by Dick Stanley. And he has a fictional account of a widow, Parthenia Leila Ellis, one time wife to the Confederate Major Clayton Ellis of Knoxville, and she, by this time, is in favor of the Union. It divides families.

Absalom's vacillation in Jerusalem cost him his life. He listens to the counsel of Ahithophel and Hushai, David's spy. He failed to press home the military advantage. When he did go into battle, the terms were almost equal. And David, when this battle ensues, and it ensues in the forest of Ephraim. And we're told that the forest took as many men as swords did. David says to his three commanders, "Go gently, for my sake, with Absalom." Perhaps David, you see, realizes that he is partly to blame himself for Absalom. I think it's been brought home to David that Absalom is a fruit that didn't fall far from the tree. There are three lessons I want us to see in this passage and there are three lessons surrounding the three principle characters in this story - Absalom, Joab, and David. It's all so terribly undignified, isn't it? Absalom's end, this poster-boy, this handsome young man, virile young man whose posters would have adorned the bedrooms of teenage girls from Dan to Beersheba. (laughter) He's on a mule and his hair, or is it his head, catches in a branch of an oak and he's probably unconscious. He can't do anything to dislodge himself and the mule keeps on going and he's hanging there. He's still alive but he's hanging from this oak tree. It's such an undignified end for a man of this caliber.

It's fascinating - the exchange between Joab and this unnamed soldier that finds him but doesn't kill him. He says to Joab — Joab wants to know why he hasn't killed him and he says, "Well, would you stand by me? Even if you gave me ten thousand pieces of silver and David's ire is kindled because he's given express orders to go gently with Absalom" — would Joab stand by him? And Joab has enough and puts three javelins into Absalom and then other soldiers come and finish him off and he's dead. And they bury him. He's buried as somebody who's

cursed — in a pit, covered by stones, and the way it's describes in the Hebrew text is reminiscent of the burial of those who are under the curse. It's tragic, isn't it? It's tragic. By any standards, this is a tragic death. This would be headline news - like Michael Jackson. Idol - and he's dead in terrible circumstances.

You know, God wasn't obligated to give Absalom a dead-bed opportunity to repent. He was totally unconscious. That's a solemn thought, isn't it? God is under no obligation to give Absalom a death-bed opportunity to repent. I want to speak to you teenagers and young men tonight. You want to go off to college, you want to leave home, you want to experience some of the freedoms and joys of life, you want to sow some wild oats, you've heard testimonies of folk in here of days in college and then later when they're twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty - it's time to settle down, find a wife, get a house, get a job and forget about that. And maybe that's what you'd like to do, to sow your wild oats like Absalom, thinking that an opportunity will be given you later to repent. And then one day when you're driving home from college a drunk driver comes out of nowhere and you're dead. Who would have thought Absalom would have been dead? If you'd seen him, and you could have seen him on the rooftop, in a tent with David's concubines, what a contrast from that to hanging from an oak tree with javelins in your heart and you're dead and buried in the pit of somebody who's cursed.

You know, young people, that's why the Bible says, that's why the Bible says, "Exhort one another daily while it is called today" because sin is so deceitful. It is so deceitful. It will hoodwink you into thinking that you've got time to repent. You may not live to see another week. My dear friends you may not live to see another week and you need to close with Jesus. You need to have Jesus as your joy and your happiness and your fulfillment and you need to do that now while it is called today, lest you be swallowed up by the deceitfulness of sin. Absalom's death is tragic. If Ligon were performing the funeral for Absalom, what could he say about Absalom? If Brister were giving a eulogy on behalf of Absalom, what could he say about Absalom that would give you any shred of hope or comfort that he was in the arms of the Savior? None. God was under no obligation. I want you to hear this. God is under no obligation to give you an opportunity for death-bed repentance. He says to you, "Now, today, is the day of salvation." Trust in Jesus today.

But there's a second lesson here and it comes from Joab, David's nephew. Joab was the son of one of David's sisters. Now this exchange between Joab and David - when David hears of the death of Absalom he goes to pieces. He loses the plot. You can understand. It's terrible. It's tragic. And I think David realized the tragedy of it, not just that he had lost Absalom his son, and not only because David was, in part, responsible for it, but I think David knew deep down that Absalom had no faith. He was a covenant breaker. And I think that's part of the tragedy for David, but this is no time for the king, in victory, in battle, to be blubbing. This is not the time. And the exchange, isn't it graphic, this exchange between Joab? Joab could have had his head cut off for the things he said to

David — and he will, and he will in the next chapter. He will be demoted. He'll lose his post. And in an act — I can't make up my mind. In the second chapter of 1 Kings, on David's deathbed — is it an act of revenge that he asks Solomon to put Joab to death? Which he does.

Joab, what can we say about Joab? Joab's a man's man. Joab's a military commander. He's the guy CNN wants to interview about what's going on in Libya and the strategy, the war talk. This was no time for a "let's consult the Geneva Convention" moment. Someone had to make the tough decision, and the tough decision was — if Absalom lived, he'd be a thorn in David's side for the rest of his life. He'd be the rallying point for every disgruntled wannabe terrorist in Israel. It would never be over. Joab, as a soldier, as a general, decides this man has to die. You know the writer of 2 Samuel makes no moral comment about what Joab has done here in killing Absalom against David's wishes. Joab makes a decision that David's wishes are wrong. He may be the king, he's under orders to carry out the wishes of the king, but these are bad orders and he makes a judgment. It's a judgment call that has to be made there and then. He couldn't take Absalom back to David and then make the decision. It would all be over by that time. David would spare him. So he has to make that decision and he has to make it now. He's clearly insubordinate for sure. But Joab does it for the sake of the kingdom.

You know it's messy, isn't it? It's really messy. It reminds me of Colonel Jessup in *A Few Good Men*. You remember the barter, the exchange? He's asked for the truth, and you remember his response? "You can't handle the truth! We live in a world that has walls and these walls are guarded by men with guns! I have greater responsibility than you can possibly fathom! We use words like 'honor' and 'code' and 'loyalty.' I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to somebody who rises and sleeps under the very blanket of the freedom that I provide!" Do you remember that speech? Best part of the movie. (laughter) That's what Joab is doing here. He's saying to David, "Your freedom is bought at my expense." That's what he's saying. "I've got decisions to make — decisions about life and death and I have to make them. And you can sit in your armchair and you can have your moral pontifications and write your leaders comments in the newspapers from six thousand miles away, but" Joab is saying, "I have to make this decision on the spot.

Are you with Joab? It'd be great to have a Presbyterian straw-poll: Hands up all who are on Joab's side. (laughter) You know, I have a lot of sympathy for Joab. You know, militarily, politically, Joab is right. Absalom had to die. You know, tonight, as we sit in here enjoying the freedoms and privileges of public worship, there are men and women in the Mediterranean Sea and in the Pentagon, and if we believe the press, in London and Paris and somewhere else and they, some of those folk are Christians. They are honorable Christian folk. They are believers with honor and code and resolution and they've got tough, tough, tough decisions to make for our freedoms. We need to pray for the "Joabs" of this world. We need

to pray for them. We need to have a burden to pray for the “Joabs” who have to make these very tough, moral decisions and for which they will be criticized so that we can enjoy our freedom.

There's a third lesson I want us to see and that's in David. In asking mercy for Absalom, David is recognizing that he is part of the problem. “O Absalom, Absalom, my son, Absalom!” And you can't help but sort of hear God saying back in chapter 12 of 2 Samuel, “O David, David, my son, my son, David!” Do you feel for him? His life is out of control. He watches his son spin out of control and now that he's dead he loses the plot. “Would that I had died.” We're all familiar with that in grief. The “what-ifs” — if only this had happened; if only that had happened. No parent wants to survive his children. You see what's happening here? The fulfillment of God's prophecy. Nathan had said to David, “The sword will not depart from your house.” That's what Nathan had said. “The sword will not depart from your house.” And you've got this picture of David, weeping, shedding tears. He's weak. His wisdom is questionable. His will is selfish. He's the anointed king. He's the anointed king of Israel, but he's not the Messiah. Oh my, haven't we seen that. Ever since chapters 11 and 12, down and down and down. And David is not the Messiah because when the Messiah comes, He will bear our griefs and carry our sorrows.

We're going to sing in a minute these words: “But drops of grief can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe; here, Lord, I give myself away, 'tis all that I can do.” You watch David here, the anointed king of Israel, and he's crying, he's weeping for his son, but he's only a man. He's only a man. And tonight we need a God-Man. We need great David's greater Son to redeem us and save us and bring us into this everlasting kingdom. Yeah, that's the third lesson, isn't it? How much we need Jesus. No man, not even David, can save us. Only Jesus, only Jesus can save.

Let's pray.

Father we thank You for Your Word. We've been thinking of an event that took place three thousand years ago, but the truths are abiding, they are real tonight. We pray for young men and young women here tonight, aspiring to leave and go off to college but they're not believers, thinking they have the whole future ahead of them, and perhaps they don't. So in Your sovereign grace and mercy, bring them tonight, to Yourself, 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.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No

attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the [First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement](#).

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).