

21. Which king is it to be?

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[0 : 00] Now, we're going to read in the second book of Samuel again, chapter 15 this time, which is on page 266 of the Bibles. David's son Absalom has managed to insinuate himself back into Jerusalem and is working behind the scenes to undermine his father.

And that's where we take up the story. 2 Samuel 15, and we'll read the whole chapter. After this, Absalom got himself a chariot and horses and 50 men to run before him.

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, Well, what city are you? And when he said, Your servants are of such and such a tribe in Israel, Absalom would say to him, See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you.

And 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.

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. Thus Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment.

[1 : 28] So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel. At the end of four years, Absalom said to the king, Please let me go and pay my vow, which I vowed to the Lord in Hebron.

For your servant vowed a vow while I lived in Geshur in Aram, saying, If the Lord will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will offer worship to the Lord.

The king said to him, Go in peace. So Absalom arose and went to Hebron. 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 in Hebron.

With Absalom went 200 men from Jerusalem who were invited guests. And they went in their innocence and knew nothing. And while Absalom was offering the sacrifices, He sent for Ahithophel, the Gileonite, David's counselor from his city Gilead.

And the conspiracy grew strong. And the people of Absalom kept increasing. And a messenger came to David, saying, The hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom.

[2 : 38] Then David said to all his servants who are with him at Jerusalem, Arise and let us flee, or else there will be no escape for us from Absalom. Go quickly, lest you overtake us quickly and bring down ruin on us, and strike the city with the edge of the sword.

And the king's servants said to the king, Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever, my lord, the king decides. So the king went out and all his household after him.

The king left ten concubines to keep the house. And the king went out and all the people after him. And they halted at the last house. And all his servants passed by him.

And all the Kerithites and the Pelethites and all the six hundred Gittites who had followed him from Gath passed on before the king. 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. You came only yesterday. And shall I today make you wander about with us?

[3 : 41] 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. 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.

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. 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. 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. 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. But if he says, I have no pleasure in you, behold, here I am.

[4 : 56] Let him do to me what seems good to him. 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.

See, I will wait at the fords of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me. So Zadok and Abiathar carried the ark of God back to Jerusalem, and they remained there.

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.

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.

While David was coming to the summit where God was worshipped, behold, Hushai the archite came to meet him with his coat torn and dirt on his head. David said to him, If you go on with me, you will be a burden to me.

[6 : 00] 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. Are not Zadok and Abiathar the priest with you there? So whatever you hear from the king's house, tell it to Zadok, Abiathar the priests.

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.

So, Hushai, David's friend, came into the city just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem. Amen. This is the word of the Lord.

May he bless it to our hearts. Now, before we look at 2 Samuel 15, which let me remind you is on page 266, let's have a word of prayer. Speak, O Lord, till your church is built and the earth is filled with your glory.

[7 : 06] Father, we believe that you have things to say to us, things that we need to hear. So we pray that you will indeed open your word to our hearts and minds and open our hearts and minds to your word.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I think it would be very difficult to deny that we live in a celebrity culture.

Indeed, I googled celebrity culture and found there were 17,400,000 entries. Now, granted that Google sites keep on repeating things, that is an astonishing number.

What alarmed me a bit more was I googled in celebrity culture in the evangelical world and there were nearly 400,000 entries. You see, this chapter begins with the celebrity culture.

That's what these verses about Absalom are about. Last week, the chapter was dominated by Mr. Fix-It, Joab. Here, this first part of the chapter is dominated by Mr. Celebrity, Absalom, the king's son.

[8 : 27] Once again, it's a story of deviousness and underhand dealings like last week's story. And again, we're in the world of Genesis 3.

Read again the conversation of the serpent with Eve and you'll find the techniques that Absalom uses here are the techniques of the serpent. Flattery, misrepresentation and subtlety.

This is a reminder of what's at stake in this chapter. Will God's kingdom come? Will God's king reign? Will indeed the earth be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea?

Or will it be overwhelmed with evil? And more exactly, which king is it to be? That's our title for this evening. Which time, which king is it to be?

Eighteen times or so in this chapter the word king is mentioned. The king, the king, the king. David, the Lord's anointed whom he placed on the holy hill of Zion.

[9 : 34] That's why you read Psalm 2, of course, or rather sang Psalm 2 at the beginning. The nations rage and cry and try to remove God's king from the holy hill of Zion.

And we have two portraits here of two different kinds of kings. And the question for each one of us is which king is going to receive our loyalty?

Who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the king? Which king is it to be? Chapter 4 and the two unequal parts and each of them describe the king or a king.

And first of all, let's look in verses 1 to 12 at the false and faithless king or the false and faithless would-be king. The apparently irresistible rise of Absalom.

In verse 12, the conspiracy grew strong and the people of Absalom kept increasing. I said last week when these kind of things happen, people begin to feel there's an inevitability.

[10:41] When evil, when mischief is afoot, it seems as if there is no limit to it and that no one can stop it. You see, Absalom does have real ability.

There is no doubt about that. He combines real ability with sham and cunning. He is indeed an angel of light. Let's look at what he does then.

How do we recognize the false and faithless king? Well, first of all, verse 1, he cultivates his image. This is, if you just glance back at the previous chapter, chapter 14, verses verse 25, now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance.

And last week we saw that is not saying that being handsome is a bad thing. It's reminding us of the earlier claimants to kingship in the book. The Saul and Eliab, David's elder brother, who, of course, were also described as very handsome.

See, Absalom surrounds himself with the trappings of kingship, chariots and horses. That'll set warning bells ringing because in Deuteronomy Moses warns that if you have a king, he will build up chariot corps and horses, military, military hardware.

[12:02] Fifty men, the beginning of a private army, a show of power. He cultivates his image. He looks like a king. Therefore, people think he is.

Difficult not to find, not to be reminded of a later chapter in the Bible. All the kingdoms of this world, said the devil, I will give you if you bow down and worship.

So he cultivates his image. Secondly, in verses 2 to 6, he shows a concern for justice. All sounds very reasonable, doesn't it?

He used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate. Now remember the gate in the Old Testament is the place where business is transacted, where people are the equivalent of the marketplace and almost, you know, the kind of place where people meet to discuss and to debate. That's where Proverbs tells us wisdom calls aloud at the gate. So does folly, actually. So Absalom here goes to the place where people are and shows concern for them.

[13:13] But there are warning, I mean, first of all, this sounds great. Hey, you guys, if I'm king, I'll look after you. I'll make sure there is justice in the land. But there are warning signs everywhere, aren't there?

First of all, Absalom never seemed to meet a plaintiff whom he disagreed with. Notice what it said, verse 3, your claims are good and right. How does he know their claims are good and right?

He hasn't asked them. He hasn't examined it. He hasn't put any thinking into it. And look, it would all be different if I were judged, he says. Look at verse 4, Oh, that I were judge, then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice.

You see, Absalom doesn't have to make any hard or unpopular judgments. He doesn't have to make any judgments at all. He only needs to claim that he's interested in justice.

He doesn't actually ever have to carry out justice. And anyway, the implication here, of course, is obvious. My father's passed it. He's really lost the plot.

[14:26] He's lost the grip on things. There is nobody to give judgment. Now, then, of course, there may be an element of truth in that. Nevertheless, if you were here last week, you'll remember the woman of Tekoa, whom the king received and heard her plea for justice.

So, it does appear to work. Promise without fulfillment. Promise without delivery. His manifesto sounds great, but he never has to, he's never tested on it.

He didn't truly love them. Notice the very careful phrase, verse 6, Absalom stole the hearts. Not Absalom won the hearts. Not Absalom won the loyalty or deserved the love.

Absalom stole the hearts. Like the serpent, he used glamorous deceit to ensnare them. Never had to fulfill any promises.

Promise, promise, promise, and Absalom no fulfillment. This is always the way when people promise that. No struggles, no battles, no hardships.

[15:36] The prosperity gospel, which isn't a gospel at all, the opposite of what Isaac Shaw was saying this morning. Everything is promised and nothing is delivered.

So his concern for justice sounds good, but after all it's what people do, isn't it? It's not what they say they're doing. Easy enough to say we're doing this and we're doing that, particularly when we don't have to, particularly when we don't actually have to deliver anything.

I think the third thing about Absalom is, and we've noticed this already, he conceals his true motives by using the language of piety. Verse 7, at the end of four years, Absalom said to the king, please let me go and pay my vow, which I vowed to the Lord in Hebron.

That's probably not true, but even if it is true, if the Lord will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, I will offer worship to the Lord. Well, he's been two years in Jerusalem.

What's he been doing all that time? He didn't have to wait two years to worship the Lord. Now, those of you who were here last Sunday morning will remember Willie preached on Jacob's vow in Genesis 28, which is utterly different, because Jacob's vow, if you will bring me back safely, you will be my God, was not a bargaining counter, it was the beginning of a genuine if rocky relationship with the Lord.

[17:04] The Absalom is being totally deceitful. And you can see this by comparing verse 7 with verse 10. At the end of four years, Absalom said to the king, please let me go and pay the vow to the Lord.

Look at verse 10. 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, Absalom has become king, Absalom reigns, in Hebron.

That's where his father, of course, had begun his reign. Now, Absalom is attacking the Lord's anointed here. Remember his father David, provoked beyond measure, had refused twice, back in one Samuel, to lay a hand on the Lord's anointed.

The other interesting thing is this, deep at the heart of Israel's faith, and you get this in a number of Psalms, like Psalms 47, 93, 97, and 99, is exactly the same words, with one significant difference. Israel praised the Lord and said, Yahweh, the Lord is king, the Lord reigns. See what's happened here? The reigning Lord has been replaced by Absalom.

[18:32] Absalom is not only attempting to depose David, he's attempting to depose God himself. Now you see, David got it, I will come to this in a moment too, David was not perfect.

David probably had lost the grip a bit, but I think in the second part of the chapter we begin to see him coming back to his senses, even though David got it wrong.

He is the Lord's anointed king. David never anywhere proclaimed, David, say David is king. David waited until the Lord made him king. So you see how different it is.

You see, this is what celebrities do, isn't it? Last week when we were looking at the genuine and the false, I referred several times to 2 Corinthians, Paul's attack on the super pastors, the celebrities of his time, who were dupes of the devil and who were all show.

Now that comparison is valid because what was Absalom claiming to be? Absalom was claiming to be the shepherd of Israel. The king was appointed to be the pastor, the shepherd of Israel.

[19:47] That's what Absalom was claiming. Without showing any of the heart of the shepherd, without showing any desire to serve, but only a desire to present himself.

See, 98% of the work of God is not done by celebrities, but by people whom no one's ever heard of. Paul did not say to Timothy, go on the point of you celebrities in Crete and the church will manage perfectly well.

Paul says, go on the point faithful men who will be able to teach others. Absalom shows no desire whatever to be a pastor to the people. Remember back in 2 Samuel 7, the covenant with David.

You will be a shepherd. You will be a pastor to my people. Absalom is false. Absalom is faithless. That is the kind of king who is presenting himself.

But the glamour, the sheer razzmatazz that surrounds Absalom. Who said spin-doctoring was invented in the 20th century?

[20:52] Of course it wasn't. Who said the celebrity culture only began recently? It didn't. Here is Mr. Celebrity, the false and the faithless king.

Now in contrast to that in the second part of the chapter verses 13 to 37, we have the flawed but faithful king. David had sinned, David had failed, but the genuine nature of the true king, I think, comes out here.

The mirror image of Absalom. He's dignified, he is kingly in retreat. As I said, the mention of the word king, this is the Lord's anointed.

Why do the nations rage? Why does Absalom rage and imagine a vain thing? The Lord has set David on his holy hill of Zion. The Lord will one day set David's greater son over the whole earth, the holy hill of Zion.

Isaiah, when he talks about the new heaven and new earth, often uses the image of the holy hill of Zion. So, what are the marks of the flawed but faithful king?

[22 : 04] First of all, he cares genuinely for the people. There's no rash promises. There's no extravagant claims.

Back in, as I said, back in chapter 7, God had appointed David to be a shepherd, to be a pastor for my people Israel. David retreats because he wants to save the people from death and the city from devastation.

Later on, he can defeat Absalom, but if he had tried to fight him in the narrow streets of Jerusalem, undoubtedly there had been massive bloodshed, the city would have been utterly devastated.

And it's interesting, in these verses, 13 to 17, the words king clusters over and over again. The king servant said, so the king went out, the king left ten concubines.

Verse 17, the king went out and all the people after him. God's king, in other words, may be going into exile, but he is still God's king.

[23 : 12] And little details here again. Notice they halted at the last house at the end of verse 17. Almost certainly to make sure that all the people with him were safe and hadn't fallen by the wayside.

Surely he's pointing here to his greater son, my sheep hear my voice, and they follow me, and no one will pluck them from my hand.

This is the genuine king, the true king, he's flawed, but he's faithful. And I say he's coming back into his own again, facing this crisis. It must have been particularly bitter.

After all, he must have thought the years of persecution by Saul, the years of wilderness exile were over, but they weren't. And in some of the Psalms, Psalm 3, for example, and other Psalms, he mourns at the vindictive pursuit of his son, Absalom.

He cares genuinely for his people. Secondly, he gains the loyalty of the people. Verses 18 to 23, all his servants passed by him.

[24 : 25] There's a deliberate contrast. Absalom, his son, rejects him, but he has a loyal bodyguard of foreign troops, the Cherethites, the Pelethites, and especially those from the city of Gath.

I always think this is wonderful in the David story. David's story begins ringingly and wonderfully through the defeat of the champion Goliath of Gath. But here, particularly this man, Itai, the man from Gath, faithful, loyal to David, he came to his own and his own did not welcome him.

But to those who did welcome him, he made them to be children of God, says John. This is particularly embodied, as I say, in Itai. He is willing to be with the king whatever the outcome.

Itai said, verse 21, as the Lord lives, and as my Lord the king lives. That's fascinating, isn't it? The Lord lives. That's the absolute bedrock of faith.

But he believes David has a future as well. As the Lord, the king lives, wherever my Lord the king shall be, whether for death or life, there will your servant be.

[25 : 42] It's interesting, the first time for a long time in the story, the great covenant words in verse 20, may Yahweh, may the Lord show steadfast love, this great word of God's covenant faithfulness, may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you.

And later on in chapter 18, when David faces Absalom's army, Zittai is given a prominent and honoured place in the battle. The great enemy city, from there comes the great loyal servant of David.

Surely this is the heart of the gospel. While we were still enemies, Christ died for us. This is what grace does. Grace transforms us.

Whatever our background, whatever our origin, grace transforms. God has his people. These people are loyal under pressure.

Anybody can be loyal, of course, when there's no pressure. Anyone can talk loyally. Anyone can pretend to be loyal. But here, here's a man saying, whether in death or in life, I'm with you.

[27 : 01] David shows genuine concern for the people. David inspires loyalty. And the third thing is David shows true godliness, not sham piety.

That's the point, I think, of verses 24 to 26. Now, as the priests come and the Levites of the Ark of the Covenant of God, they are doing this from the best of motives, of course, you can understand.

They are saying, you are the king, you are the anointed king, the Ark of the Covenant ought to be with you. And they set down the Ark of God until all the people had passed out of the city.

Probably an echo of an earlier story where as the people entered the land, the Ark of the Covenant of God went with them across the River Jordan, way back in the book of Joshua.

But David, of course, remembers an earlier story. David remembers almost certainly the story in 1 Samuel 4 when the Philistines came against Israel at the time of Eli, and with great unwisdom the Israelites took the Ark of the Covenant into battle with them, using it as a talisman with disastrous results.

[28 : 17] David is not going to use the Ark as a talisman. David, in other words, is not going to claim the Lord. He is the Lord's, but the Lord is not his.

Ralph Davis says, David is not concerned whether he has Yahweh's furniture, but whether he has Yahweh's favor. That is the point. He's enough to have the Lord's furniture in the sense of doing all the right things, going to all the right places, saying all the right words.

But David is concerned in verse 25, carry the Ark of God back into the city. That's where it belongs. That's where I brought it, brought it back from Philistine land and placed it there.

And of course, there is the assurance that because the Ark is there, that he may return, although he's not going to take God for granted. If I find favor, if I find grace in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and his dwelling place.

But if he says, I have no pleasure in you, behold, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him. David rests on grace. How different.

[29 : 28] Absalom, go and proclaim, Absalom is king. Absalom reigns. The anointed king says, I depend totally on grace. But if the Lord brings me back, that's wonderful.

And if he doesn't, then I've got to bow to his judgment. He knows better than I. David has the throne by God's gift. David will not snatch it. And I think also, just another little detail, in verse 30, David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went barefoot and with his head covered.

That was a journey his greater son was to make as he faced the cross. There are so many foreshadowings of that as he would climb the Mount of Olives to die for the sins of the world.

But one other thing about David, David shows resourcefulness and initiative. This is verses 27 to the end of the chapter. See, resting on God's grace, trusting in God's providence, does not mean we do nothing.

Remember Cromwell's famous words, trust in God and keep your powder dry. Well, David is keeping his powder dry. If we trust in God, if we trust in his grace, then that liberates us, doesn't it?

[30 : 53] Because we know the outcome doesn't depend on us. But yet, we need to act sensibly and shrewdly. That's exactly what David does.

He sends Zadok and his two sons, not only to return the ark, but to be his eyes and ears in Jerusalem. David is not going to allow Absalom to get away.

And you can see the old David returning, the old shrewd, capable, wise David coming back, coming back into action here. And when he receives the devastating news that Ahithophel, verse 31, it was told David Ahithophel is among the conspirators of Absalom, shrewd, wise man.

You notice once again here, you've got the two things. Oh Lord, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness. He relies on the Lord, and yet he sends this other friend, Hushai, once again to defeat verse 34.

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.

[32 : 14] He's going to be a counterweight to Ahithophel, later on the chapter you find out that happened. So you see, you've got the prayer which trusts in grace, and you've got the sensible action, which is right and proper.

And we know that, don't we? The fact we believe the Lord has his hand and his blessing on our work here doesn't mean that all those endless meetings didn't have to take place and don't have to take place with presbyteries and commissions and all the rest of it.

We are trusting in God, but we are keeping our powder dry. That's so much here. And it's, I mean, verse 37, a fascinating verse. I mean, if this were a film, you would hear the music beating at this point, and you'd have to wait till the next episode.

So actually, we'll have to wait for the next episode for quite a little while. So that's quite a good point. So Hushai, David's friend, came into the city just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem. Two men enter the city at the same time, one determined to destroy David, the other to ensure that David wins.

[33 : 24] You see how dramatic it is as they're leaving us on a cliffhanger. I mean, this story, I mean, read the next chapters, which you'll get to eventually.

Read the next chapters. One of the most exciting developed narratives in the whole of the Bible. Now, in many ways, of course, it is a sad scene.

Nathan had promised that David would be judged for his sin, and the judgments are working out in his own family. And yet, David is still the rightful king.

And, as I say, these two portraits here. Now, sometimes, sometimes in Scripture, you get portraits of the true king. For example, in Psalm 72, Psalm attributed to Solomon, you get the picture of the true king of his justice.

Later on, as we come to the end of this series, in 2 Samuel 23, David himself talks about the just and true and faithful king.

[34 : 27] What we've got here is much more a dramatic snapshot of what the false king looks like and how to recognize him and not be deceived, and how to recognize the true king as well.

So, essentially, what this story is saying to us is don't be seduced by glamour, popularity, and spin. On the other hand, don't be endlessly critical of everything.

I mean, because someone looks good doesn't mean they're not, but don't be seduced by appearance. Remember the story at the very beginning and at the very heart of the David saga. God looks on the heart. God does not judge by outward appearance. God looks on the heart. And the second thing it's saying to us, like Itai, like Hoshai, like so many others, we have to choose which king our allegiance is going to be to.

And this is happening all the time, isn't it? We've had to choose the fellowship which king our loyalty is going to be to.

[35 : 36] And obviously as individuals we have to decide that. And Itai is a tremendous role model here, isn't he? Whatever my the lord, the king shall be, whether for life or death, there also will your servant be.

Words spoken also by Ruth to her mother-in-law. Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God.

will be my God. Which king? Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for the power of these stories, which are more than stories and yet are brilliantly told tales.

we thank you that dimly, imperfectly, in the anointed king with his flaws, we nevertheless see faithfulness and we see dimly the one who is the true king who demands all our allegiance.

And we pray that as we leave here this evening, we will indeed say, as we shall shortly sing, we are on the Lord's side. We ask this in Jesus' name.

[36 : 56] Amen.