

23. The Kingdom saved

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Date: 03 June 2012

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[0 : 00] Well, now let's turn together to the scriptures, to our Bibles. You'll find it in 2 Samuel, chapter 18. If you have one of the church visitors' Bibles, that's page 269.

And we're going to read the whole of chapter 18 down to the end of verse 8, or the mid of verse 8 of chapter 19. I remember the last time that Bob was looking at this.

We read of David's flight from Jerusalem when the men of Israel had gone after Absalom in rebellion.

And we read the moving story of David being cursed and scorn heaped upon him. And this terrible low point.

And yet at the end, many loyal followers rallying to his side and to provide for him and to stand with him in his hour of need.

[1 : 06] So chapter 18, verse 1, we read, 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's 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.

[2 : 23] 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 all 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 terebinth, an oak tree. 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.

[3 : 28] For in our hearing the king commanded you, and Abishai and Ittai, for my sake protect the young man Absalom. And on the other hand, if I had dealt treacherously against his life, and there's nothing hidden from the king, then you yourself would have stood aloof.

Joab said, I'll 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.

And Joab blew the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained them. And they took Absalom and threw him into the great pit in the forest and raised over him a very great heap of stones.

And all Israel fled, everyone 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's called Absalom's monument to this day. Then Ahimeaz, 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.

[4 : 41] 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. And Joab said to the Cushite, You go, tell the king what you have seen.

The Cushite bowed before Job and said to Job, Come what may, sorry, bowed before Job and ran. And Ahimeaz, the son of Joach, said to Job, Come what may, let me also run after the Cushite. And Job said, Why will you run, my son? Seeing that you'll have no reward for the news. Come what may, he said, I will run. So he said to him, run. Then Ahimeaz 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's alone, there is news in his mouth. And he drew nearer and nearer. The watchman saw another man running.

[5 : 46] 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 Ahimeaz, son of Zadok.

And the king said, He's a good man and comes with good news. Then Ahimeaz 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? Ahimeaz answered, When Joab sent the king's servant, your servant, I saw a great commotion, but I don't 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 against you.

The king said to the Cushite, Is it well with the young man Absalom? 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.

[7 : 06] The king was deeply moved, went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, Oh, my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom, would that I had died instead of you, oh 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 all flee in battle. The king covered his face and the king cried with a loud voice, Oh, my son Absalom, oh Absalom, my son, my son.

Then Joab came into the house to the king and said, You have today covered with shame all the faces of 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.

You have made it clear today that the commanders and the servants are as nothing to you. But 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.

[8 : 31] For I swear by the Lord, if you do not go out, 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. And the king arose and took his seat in the gate.

And the people were all told, Behold, the king is sitting in the gate. And all the people came before the king. Amen.

May God bless us. This is word. Now as we turn to 2 Samuel 18 and 19, let's have a moment of quiet while we ask the Lord's help.

God our Father, we believe you have things to say to us, things that we need to hear. And we pray that your living word will come to us, sharper and more powerful than a two-edged sword, searching out our innermost being and speaking to us with a voice that both challenges and heals.

A voice that we recognize is not simply the voices of the world or the voices of our own fantasies, but you, the living God, speaking to us and leading us through the written word, through the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

[9 : 57] Amen. Now this particular story, I think, brings together very clearly the two things that I've been trying to point out in all this series on David, God's flawed but faithful servant.

First of all, we need to see the big picture. This isn't just a story of daring do, of great exploits, of somebody who lived and breathed and who was a magnificent king as well as a tremendous sinner. Now all that is true, but we need to look at the big picture. As I've often enough said, we are not David. It's not a case of simply looking at this story and saying, David got it right there, let's be like David.

And David got it wrong there, don't be like David. Trouble about that kind of preaching is, you end up saying the same thing about every passage in the Bible and it becomes boring.

On the other hand, we mustn't moralize about the story. We are not David.

[11 : 13] This story is not about us, but it's for us. And we need to look at David as a man under God's discipline, a man living under God's guidance.

If we keep both these things in mind, then I think this story will begin to make more sense. It's a powerful story, one of the most moving stories in the whole of literature.

It's inspired many artists as well as many writers. Powerful and moving human story. And we need to look at the human aspects of the story.

The military aspects are rushed over. This tremendous rebellion that had been bubbling and fizzling for a long time, it simply fizzles out. The elaborate buildup, the groundswell of support for Absalom, and then suddenly it's over.

Over almost without dwelling on. Over without any prolonged description. The kingdom is saved. That's our title tonight.

[12 : 18] But as always in human situations, there is a cost. David's throne is saved, but David's heart is broken. It's a very powerful human story.

But secondly, if we don't understand the story, we need to look at its bookends, if you like, the beginning and the end of the story. This is where the chapter divisions aren't very helpful.

Even the verse divisions aren't all that helpful because we stopped the reading in the middle of a verse, and that was the right place, I believe, to stop it. This story begins with the old energetic David commanding the army.

David is vigorous. David is full of energy. He's commanding the army, getting ready for the battle in chapter 18, verses 1 to 2.

That's how the story opens. And then the story ends in chapter 19, verse 8. Behold, the king is sitting at the gate. Now, in ancient cities, the gate was the place of government, the place of administration, the place of politics and commerce.

[13 : 25] David is back in charge. The attempt on his life, the attempt on his kingdom has failed. So let's look at the story in that light. The old, vigorous, energetic David, the warrior who had fought Goliath and who had defeated so many enemies, and then at the end of the story, back in charge, sitting at the gate.

And the story develops, I think, in four movements. The fourth is going to be a very short one, more kind of footnote. And the story centers around the question which has come up over and over and over again.

Who is fit to be king? Who is fit to rule over God's people? Now, as Willie was saying, we rejoice in 60 years of very effective, of very gracious, and of very inspirational rule.

Now, who is fit to be king over God's people? And that's the first part of the story then. Chapter 18, verses 1 to 8. The true king re-emerges.

Now, back in the previous chapters, in chapters 16 and 17, as Absalom had been becoming more and more powerful, as the groundswell of support for him was growing, then Ahithophel, the counselor who had changed sides, David's advisor, who had changed sides to Absalom, basically says, David's passed it.

[14:57] His day has gone. We need young, virile man, Absalom, to take over. Now, Hushai, the counselor whom David had infiltrated into the city to look after his interests, had said something very different, and Hushai was right.

This is the old, vigorous warrior, re-emerging. And remember, David is not a young man any longer. When David fought Goliath, he was a youth. When he was hunted and harried over the mountains and valleys of Judea, he was probably a young man in his 20s, at the most his early 30s.

He's now at least in his late 50s, possibly even his early 60s. This is no young, vigorous man, but it's a seasoned, experienced warrior. So what kind of a man is this?

First of all, he, as I say, he's showing his old warrior skill, verses 1 and 2. He's organizing the army and giving an honorable place to his old friend Itai the Gittite.

Remember we saw a few weeks ago, when David's friends, when David's family were deserting him, this man, Itai, from the Philistine city of Gath, had come and pledged his support to David, and now he's given an honorable place in the army.

[16:19] And also, David is willing to risk his life. Verse 2, I myself will go out with you. This is the shepherd who is going to give his life for the sheep, if necessary.

Remember back in 2 Samuel chapter 7, David is anointed as the shepherd of his people Israel. The covenant, the covenant lord appoints the shepherd.

And the strategy proves to be effective. Very interesting that the army in verse 7 are described as the servants of David. Now obviously, there is dense forest land, and this David's army fans out into three divisions, forces the enemy troops further and further into the forest.

Verse 8, the battle spread over the face of all the country, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword. We might well think that was an exaggeration until we go on to read that the forest very literally devoured Absalom, the figurehead of the rebellion.

You see, what's happening here, though? God is using his creation to bring about his purpose. Way back in the book of Judges, when Barak was fighting against the Canaanites, against the Canaanite Commander Sisera.

[17:37] The text tells us the stars in their courses fought against Sisera. Then Job tells us God prepares snow and hail for the day of war and the day of battle, as both Napoleon and Hitler discovered to their cost when they tried to invade Russia during the Russian winter.

God is prepared to use the whole of creation to carry out his purpose. So David shows his old warrior skill, he inspires loyalty. Verse 3, his men will not allow him to risk his life.

They recognize there is more to this than winning a battle. There's no point in winning a battle if they lose the kingdom. This is about saving the kingdom. And thirdly, David is compassionate.

Verse 5, deal gently for my sake with the young man, Absalom. That's more literally, be kind for my sake to my boy, Absalom.

This is the father speaking. David is as compassionate with the son who was attempting to destroy him as he had been with Saul so many, many years before.

[18:52] Remember the stories back in 1 Samuel where he had refused to take advantage of the sleeping Saul and kill him. Now this same compassion is coming to the fore.

This is a man who is fit to be king. As we look down the centuries, cannot we hear other words ringing in our ears? When we were enemies, Christ died for us.

David shows the compassion that's going to be shown fully in his greater son. The true king re-emerges. And the commentators are awfully hard on him.

Essentially the view of David is, David got it right up to chapters 11 and 12. Then it was all downhill. Now David of course is suffering for his sins. We know that.

We'll come back to that. Another tempting to deny it. But nevertheless, it's ignoring all these hints about God's king. God's anointed king who wins and holds the kingdom by grace.

[19:57] So this, that's what this story is about. So the second movement, verses 9 to 18, the false king disappears.

Verses, chapter 18, verses 9 to 18. There's widespread slaughter, but the focus, the camera switches to focus on Absalom. Absalom's death is singled out for attention.

The first thing to notice is that it is famous here which causes his downfall. Back in chapter 14, verses 25 to 27, we're told he's the most handsome man in the whole of Israel, this luxurious here which gets entangled in the branches of the oak tree.

His end comes swiftly and dramatically. There's no need to fight because he's simply, he is simply ground down.

under the judgment of God. There's no gloating here, there is no dwelling on it, but surely this is typical of all who fight against the true king and the true kingdom.

[21 : 07] They will come to nothing. And God's true kingdom can only come when his enemies are defeated. He must reign, says Paul, till he has put all his enemies under his feet.

That's what's happening here. And we must not be sentimental about it because the kingdom cannot come unless the enemies are destroyed.

If the enemies refuse to bow to him now, then they will bow to him then. And the story is a very human story in another respect.

It shows both decency on the part of the unnamed soldier and dishonor on the part of Joab. This unnamed soldier, verse 10, a certain man.

Interesting sometimes to look through scripture and see how much of God's purpose and God's work is done by people who are simply called a certain man or a certain woman. People we know nothing about, but people who became part and become part of the whole tapestry of the kingdom.

[22 : 18] I saw Absalom hang on the nook and Joab of course says, why didn't you kill him? Now this unnamed man is shrewd as well as decent.

He said, if, verse 13, if I dealt treacherously against his life, if I killed Absalom, then you certainly would not have defended me.

This is exactly true. This is the kind of man Job was. There's no point in saying to Joab, if he had killed him, look, it was Joab's fault. Of course not. Joab would disassociate himself if necessary.

The story is not pretty, and there's an additional twist in it. It was Joab who had intrigued back in chapter 14 to bring Absalom back. Joab always wants to be on the winning side.

He succeeds that until in 2 Kings chapter 2, he's eventually killed by Solomon. But throughout all of David's life, he wants to be on the winning side.

[23 : 24] The story shows, as I say, both decency and dishonor. And it tells us, I think, that even in the most difficult circumstances, it is possible to act honorably.

That's what this man's behavior shows. verse 18. And then in verse 18, the tragic words in verse 18. Now, Absalom in his lifetime, had taken and set up for himself the pillar, as is in the king's valley, where he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance.

Presumably, his family were mentioned earlier, had predeceased him. He called the pillar after his own name, and it is called Absalom's monument to this day.

And this, of course, is an instant reminder of Absalom's pride. In case we start feeling sorry for him and feel this was a bit rough and a bit harsh, Absalom called the pillar after his own name.

Surely, there echoes of an earlier story in Genesis chapter 11. Come, let us build a tower that will reach to heaven, and a city, and let us make a name for ourselves.

[24 : 35] Absalom's monument is vanity of vanities, as Ecclesiastes says, both vanity as pride and vanity as emptiness.

Nothing remains of Absalom. None of his glory, none of his achievements, they simply disappear like the cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces and solemn temples in the tempest, leaving not a rack behind.

Listen to what's said about the true king in Psalm 72. May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun. May people be blessed in him.

All nations call him blessed. Nothing that's not built on the word of God, nothing that's not done in the service of the true king will last.

But what is done for him, the loyalty shown to him, the work done for him, will all be rewarded when he comes again. When we take up this story later in the summer, we're going to see how David judged those who had been loyal and disloyal during his time of exile.

[25 : 49] The true king reemerges, the false king disappears, and then in this moving passage, verses 19 to 33 of chapter 18, the true king grieves.

The good news of victory followed by the bad news of the death of Absalom. Now, clearly the story is told at some length in order to spin out the tension.

These two runners and the different characteristics and so on. This bears all the marks of an eyewitness account. You can just imagine it, the tension growing.

Ahamaz, son of Zadok, the priest, was one of the supporters of David. You can see that back in chapter 15. Job doesn't want him to go, and it's very obvious why Job doesn't want him to go. He doesn't want his own inglorious part in the story to be mentioned. Job wants to be in a situation where he can stand back and not take any responsibility.

[27 : 00] So he sends this outsider, the Kushite, an unnamed individual, and he is simply told, verse 21, tell the king what you have seen.

A neutral messenger who's not going to elaborate the story, who's not going to give away any unpleasant secrets, just go and tell the king what you have seen. And we have this exciting little story about how the Kushite, ran first, then Ahimez, having persuaded Job, runs later.

If you look at the map, you would see Ahimez would run by the longer but easier route around the Jordan Valley and indeed up past the fort of Jabbok where Jacob was to wrestle with God in Genesis 32, whereas the Kushite would run through more direct but more difficult forest terrain. We see how the story is building up. This is a real story about real people and David we can imagine as the moments tick by, as he hears the news of the runners and as he sees them coming, he is desperate and the suspense is building all the time.

Now when Ahimez arrives, he tries to give the news slowly and gently. Verse 28, Ahimez cried to the king, all is well.

[28 : 26] And that of course is true in the overall perspective, all is well. The kingdom is saved, the king is on his throne and he bowed before the king and with his face to there said, blessed be the Lord your God who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord, the king.

The king said, is it well with my boy Absalom? Ahimez answered, when Job sent the king's servant, your servant, I saw a great commotion, but I do not know what it was.

He cannot bring himself to give the dreadful news. However, when the Cushite arrives, he simply tells it starkly in verse 32, the king said to the Cushite, is it well with my boy Absalom?

The Cushite answered, may the enemies of my lord, the king, all who rise up against you, be like that young man. Now we know that David is a passionate man.

We've already seen David's great lament over Jonathan back in chapter 1 of this book, that exquisitely crafted lament which gives grief a voice.

[29 : 36] Here the word simply, poor out of his anguished heart. There's no artistry in this. It's just simply pure, undiluted grief.

Three times the name Absalom mentioned. Five times my son. Now some of the commentators have criticized David for behaving like this.

If he had behaved any other way, he would have been a strangely unfeeling and hard-hearted man. Why is David grieving? Well he's grieving, partly at least, because it's his own sin that has caused this.

Remember back in chapter 12, Nathan the prophet said, your sin and blood guilt were run down through your family. Grieving for his own sin, the part that had played.

And for the sense of loss, the sense of what might have been. Absalom with all his gifts could have turned out very differently. You see, while God uses Absalom to punish David, Absalom has responsibility.

[30 : 40] Absalom could have been different. David's heart is breaking. And these words, O Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom, would I have died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son, giving grief an anguished voice.

No artistry here, as I say, simply shuddering grief as David looks and contemplates what has happened. David, of course, could not die for his son.

That was not to be allowed to him. But his greater son, the man of sorrows, was going to take the guilt and the sin and the grief of the world upon his shoulders, bearing griefs and carrying sin.

That's what this story ultimately points to. Not simply the grief of a father, although it's there, this powerful human emotion, pointing forward to the grief and to the sacrifice that was going to forgive sin and bring the banished back to God's house.

So, the true king reemerges, the false king disappears, the true king grieves, but finally, just a brief word or two on chapter 19, verses 1 to the first part of 8.

[32 : 08] The true king reasserts his authority. Now, Joab brutally cuts through this grief. Verse 5, Then Joab came to the house of the king.

You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants. Verse 6, You love those who hate you and hate those who love you. That's very rich coming from Joab, because Joab most certainly does not love David.

And you have made it clear to you that commanders and servants are nothing to you. The day I know if Absalom were alive and all of us are dead today, then you would be pleased.

Now, that is simply not true, of course. That is simply Joab being brutal. Now, Joab, in a sense, is right, but his brusqueness and his insensitivity are chilling.

And once again, the compassion of David, maybe, maybe as a result of his own sin and guilt, yet his human compassion placed alongside this grim and chilling insensitivity of Joab.

[33 : 22] But the story writer makes no comment, but we're invited to look at these together. But the keys of this section, I think, is verse 8. Then the king arose and took his seat in the gate.

In other words, David is saying, I am in charge again. We need to get the kingdom back on its feet again. The kingdom is safe.

People can gather to him and notice all the people came before the king. As we've noticed so often in this story. This word, the king, the king, the king.

This is the lord's anointed king. Flawed indeed. Human, grieving, nevertheless, taking charge once again.

The king who had mustered his army at the beginning, now takes charge again. And later on, we're going to see how in 2 Samuel 23, David, in his final summing up, speaks about the king who rules justly, and the king whose just reign is like the sun shining, like the morning dew, like the rain after a long drought.

[34 : 36] So you see, this story is part of the big picture. It looks forward to the day when every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord.

The king arose and took his seat in the gate. We sang last week, he sits at God's right hand till all his foes submit, and bow beneath his throne, and fall before his feet.

That's true. That's part of the story. It's also a human story. A story of a father's heart, and it's a story that points to the compassion of the heart of our father.

And the theology of that, if you want the theological statements, is in Psalm 103, as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.

Powerful, penetrating human story, and yet a story that tells the kingdom is safe, because the king is back. Amen.

[35 : 42] Let's pray. And Father, indeed we pray that your kingdom will come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We thank you for the glimpses in this old story of the Lord's anointed, who with all his flaws and his faults and his sinfulness, nevertheless pointed forward to his greater son, and pointed forward to the time when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

And so encourage us, Lord, in these days. Encourage us as we know that the kingdom is safe, and give to us heart of compassion, as you gave it to David, your servant.

We ask this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.