

2 SAMUEL—WEEK 11

THE TIDE TURNS



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Bathing Bathsheba by Artemisia Gentileschi (1593 – 1656)
On display in the Neues Palais in Potsdam, Germany*

Absalom's coup collapses quickly. David's mole in his council overturns Ahithophel's advice and Ahithophel hangs himself. David sets up on the east side of the Jordan and defeats Absalom's army.

Meanwhile Absalom gets stuck in a tree and Joel kills him, in defiance of David's orders.

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2 Samuel, Week 11 — The Tide Turns

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1 2 Samuel 17:14–20

So Absalom and all the men of Israel said, “The advice of Hushai the Archite is better than the advice of Ahithophel.” For the LORD had purposed to defeat the good advice of Ahithophel, to the intent that the LORD might bring disaster on Absalom.

Then Hushai said to Zadok and Abiathar the priests, “Thus and so Ahithophel advised Absalom and the elders of Israel, and thus and so I have advised. Now therefore, send quickly and tell David, saying, ‘Do not spend this night in the plains of the wilderness, but speedily cross over, lest the king and all the people who are with him be swallowed up.’ ” Now Jonathan and Ahimaaz stayed at En Rogel, for they dared not be seen coming into the city; so a female servant would come and tell them, and they would go and tell King David. Nevertheless a lad saw them, and told Absalom. But both of them went away quickly and came to a man’s house in Bahurim, who had a well in his court; and they went down into it. Then the woman took and spread a covering over the well’s mouth, and spread ground grain on it; and the thing was not known. And when Absalom’s servants came to the woman at the house, they said, “Where are Ahimaaz and Jonathan?”

So the woman said to them, “They have gone over the water brook.”

And when they had searched and could not find them, they returned to Jerusalem.

The decision to take Hushai’s advice over Ahithophel’s didn’t happen naturally. *For the LORD had purposed to defeat the good advice of Ahithophel.* God is continuing to answer David’s prayer.

But Hushai isn’t certain how this will play out, so he conveys both plans to David. He also recommends that David’s troops get out of the desert ASAP and flee to the east side of the Jordan.

But there’s a problem; Jonathan, Ahimaaz, and the servant messenger are spotted by some random kid and this gets back to Absalom. Absalom dispatches a posse to find Jonathan and Ahimaaz, and they track them down to a house in Bahurim.

But the woman of the house does a thorough job of hiding them in a well and sends the posse on a wild goose chase. Eventually, the posse gives up and heads home.

The whole thing seems ridiculously improbable, save for the LORD’s blessing.

Ahimaaz and Jonathan *dared not be seen coming into the city* so that Absalom wouldn’t suspect that his plans are being conveyed to David.

But that blows up when they’re spotted with the servant. Absalom dispatching a search party for them proves that he’s concerned about it. He should be, and he should be suspicious of his entire inner circle of confidants.

But, as we’ll soon see, he doesn’t change his plans. That’s astonishingly reckless. David is famous for his military accomplishments.

2 2 Samuel 17:21–29

Now it came to pass, after they had departed, that they came up out of the well and went and told King David, and said to David, “Arise and cross over the water quickly. For thus has Ahithophel advised against you.” So David and all the people who were with him arose and crossed over the Jordan. By morning light not one of them was left who had not gone over the Jordan.

Now when Ahithophel saw that his advice was not followed, he saddled a donkey, and arose and went home to his house, to his city. Then he put his household in order, and hanged himself, and died; and he was buried in his father’s tomb.

Then David went to Mahanaim. And Absalom crossed over the Jordan, he and all the men of Israel with him. And Absalom made Amasa captain of the army instead of Joab. This Amasa was the son of a man whose name was Jithra, an Israelite, who had gone in to Abigail the daughter of Nahash, sister of Zeruah, Joab’s mother. So Israel and Absalom encamped in the land of Gilead.

Now it happened, when David had come to Mahanaim, that Shobi the son of Nahash from Rabbah of the people of Ammon, Machir the son of Ammiel from Lo Debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim, brought beds and basins, earthen vessels and wheat, barley and flour, parched grain and beans, lentils and parched seeds, honey and curds, sheep and cheese of the herd, for David and the people who were with him to eat. For they said, “The people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness.”

Some commentators explain Ahithophel’s suicide as the logical result of his catastrophic loss of stature with the king, but suicide is typically anything but logical. There’s nothing wrong with Absalom getting a second opinion and then taking it. Ahithophel wasn’t a prophet, but therein lies the first clue as to what was really going on.

Now the advice of Ahithophel, which he gave in those days, was as if one had inquired at the oracle of God. So was all the advice of Ahithophel both with David and with Absalom. — 2 Samuel 16:23

This is unhealthy. Ahithophel is living on a pedestal that doesn’t fit. That pretending wears on his sanity.

The other clue is Ahithophel’s creepy advice to Absalom back in Chapter 16.

And 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 are abhorred by your father. Then the hands of all who are with you will be strong.” — 2 Samuel 16:21

Given what Nathan told David, this sounds like Ahithophel is trying to live up to his reputation by using grand words. That makes perfect sense in light of the message of “The Emperor’s New Clothes”. There, everyone could see the emperor’s clothes unless they were “unqualified for their position or impossibly dull.” No one in the town, except for a child, saw a contradiction in their inability to see the clothes.

Each one, like Ahithophel, knew he was a pretender.

3 2 Samuel 18:1–8

And David numbered the people who were with him, and set captains of thousands and captains of hundreds over them. Then David sent out one third of the people under the hand of Joab, one third under the hand of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the hand of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the people, "I also will surely go out with you myself."

But the people answered, "You shall not go out! For if we flee away, they will not care about us; nor if half of us die, will they care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us now. For you are now more help to us in the city."

Then the king said to them, "Whatever seems best to you I will do." So the king stood beside the gate, and all the people went out by hundreds and by thousands. Now the king had commanded Joab, Abishai, and Ittai, saying, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave all the captains orders concerning Absalom.

So the people went out into the field of battle against Israel. And the battle was in the woods of Ephraim. The people of Israel were overthrown there before the servants of David, and a great slaughter of twenty thousand took place there that day. For the battle there was scattered over the face of the whole countryside, and the woods devoured more people that day than the sword devoured.

This is a pretty normal—good guys win, bad guys lose—account of a battle, except for the last sentence. What does, "*the woods devoured more people that day than the sword devoured,*" mean?

The Hebrew word that's translated as, "devoured" (אכל, a-khal) is the normal word for "eat." That is, it doesn't mean killed, it means consumed.

Thus, this isn't about animated trees like in *The Lord of the Rings*, nor about people tripping over logs while running and doing fatal face plants. It could refer to people who got lost in the woods never to be seen again, but that can't explain over ten thousand lost.

More likely, it's a euphemism for what mattered most in the battle. Absalom had a much larger army. In an open field, they would surely win, but trees change the battlespace. Skill becomes critical. The larger army can't bring overwhelming numbers to bear in a single location, and no one can see very far.

The army that gets there first can hide and wait. That's huge.

While the text doesn't say that David's army got there first, that had to be the case. They were first across the Jordan, and then they were not the pursuers; they were being pursued. The pursuers have to go where the pursued are.

David's army got to choose the battleground. They picked the woods and got ready.

He who is prudent and lies in wait for an enemy who is not, will be victorious. — Sun Tzu

4 2 Samuel 18:9–18 (ESV)

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.

Try to picture Absalom hanging there, stuck in the tree. It’s not easy to do. Why couldn’t he just free himself? Was he unconscious?

Many commentators think it was Absalom’s famously long hair that got tangled in the tree.

Now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. And when he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king’s weight. — 2 Samuel 14:25–26 (ESV)

The tangled hair theory makes sense. It’s plausible that as he hangs by his hair, Absalom is unable to free himself—not so much if by the neck. Riding one’s neck into a tree branch fork is pretty far-fetched, and should be instantly fatal anyway. Lastly, in no other passage does Absalom’s hair play a significant role.

If this isn’t it, why is 2 Samuel 14:26 even there?

Joab killing Absalom in direct defiance of David’s commands is doubly shocking because he is reminded of the command by the man who first spotted Absalom hanging there. Yet Joab wastes no time dispatching Absalom, making sure he doesn’t escape.

Joab then gives him a disgraceful burial. Only his pillar remains to memorialize his life.

And that pillar makes no sense. Absalom erected it while he was young enough to have many sons.

5 2 Samuel 18:19–27 (ESV)

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.”

Joab knows that David didn’t want Absalom killed. Now he doesn’t want Ahimaaz to deliver the news. Why? If it’s okay for the Cushite to tell David, why not Ahimaaz?

We don’t know the answer and neither does Joab. He displays his confusion when he changes his mind on whether to let Ahimaaz run and tell David what happened.

Joab has made a huge mistake and he’d like to cover it up, or at least break the news to David gently, and he doesn’t know how to do it. Absalom stuck in a tree was an incredible blessing—making it easy to capture him alive and deliver him in chains to David. The rebellion would then collapse instantly and the nation would be unified.

But Joab took it on himself to overrule David’s command and go against what sure looks like an answered prayer.

The sight of Absalom hanging there helpless in a tree should have smacked Joab right between the eyes. It’s possible for this to have happened randomly, but it has the strong look of divine intervention.

There’s a lesson in this for us—attention-getting things should get our attention. Joab just blowing off this amazing blessing was the kind of mistake a believer should never make. He was ignoring even the *possibility* that this was God’s doing.

That said, we shouldn’t see every improbable event as a miracle. Some things are just meaningless coincidences.

But they always deserve some thought.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you seen God's blessings persist despite a setback?
2. Have you seen someone hurt by being put on a pedestal?
3. What is your favorite chase scene in literature or a movie?
4. What do you want to be remembered by?
5. What improbable events have gotten your attention?

Items for prayer: