

2 Samuel 17, The God who is in charge

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- [0 : 0 0] So let's have a look at verse 1 of 2 Samuel chapter 17. Ahithophel said to Absalom, I would choose 12,000 men and set out tonight in pursuit of David.
- I would attack him while he's weary and weak. I would strike him with terror and then all the people with him will flee. I would strike down only the king and bring all the people back to you.
- The death of the man you seek will mean the return of all. All the people will be unharmed. This plan seemed good to Absalom and to all the elders of Israel. But Absalom said, summon also Hushai the archite so that we can hear what he has to say as well.
- When Hushai came to him, Absalom said, Ahithophel has given this advice. Should we do what he says? If not, give us your opinion. Hushai replied to Absalom, the advice Ahithophel has given is not good this time.
- You know your father and his men, they are fighters. And as fierce as a wild bear robbed of her cubs. Beside your father is an experienced fighter. He will not spend the night with the troops.
- [1 : 0 6] Even now he is hidden in a cave or some other place. If he should attack your troops first, whoever hears about it will say, there has been a slaughter among the troops who follow Absalom. Then even the bravest soldier whose heart is like the heart of a lion will melt with fear.
- Therefore, all Israel knows that your father is a fighter and those with him are brave. So I advise you, let all Israel from Dan to Beersheba, as numerous as the sand on the seashore, be gathered to you, with you yourself leading them into battle.
- Then we will attack him wherever he may be found. And we will fall on him as Jew settles on the ground. Neither he nor any of his men will be left alive. If he withdraws into a city, then all Israel will bring ropes to that city and we will drag it down to the valley until not so much as a pebble is left.
- Absalom and all the men of Israel said, The advice of Hushai the archite is better than that of Ahithophel. For the Lord had determined to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom.
- Hushai took Zadok and Abithar the priests. Ahithophel has advised Absalom and the elders of Israel to do such and such, but I have advised them to do so and so. Now send a message at once and tell David, do not spend the night at the fords in the wilderness.
- [2 : 2 5] Cross over without fail or the king and all the people with him will be swallowed up. Jonathan and Ahimaz were staying at Enrogel. A female servant was to go and inform them and they were to go and tell King David, for they could not risk being seen entering the city.
- But a young man saw them and told Absalom, so two of them left at once and went to the house of a man called Burrim. He had a well in his courtyard and they climbed down into it.

His wife took a covering and spread it over the opening of the well and scattered corn over it. No one knew anything about it. When Absalom's men came to the woman at the house, they asked, Where are Ahimaz and Jonathan?

The woman answered, They've crossed over the brook. The men searched but found no one. So they returned to Jerusalem. After they had gone, the two climbed out of the well and went to inform King David.

They said to him, Set out and cross the river at once. Ahithophel has advised such and such against you. So David and all the people with him set out and crossed the Jordan.

[3 : 28] By daybreak, no one was left who had not crossed the Jordan. When Ahithophel saw that his advice had not been followed, he saddled his donkey and set out for his house in his hometown. He put his house in order and then hanged himself.

So he died and was buried in his father's tomb. David went to Mahanaim and Absalom crossed the Jordan with all the men of Israel. Absalom had appointed Amasa over the army in the place of Joab.

Amasa was the son of Jethar, an Ishmaelite who had married Abigail, the daughter of Nahash, and sister of Zariah, the mother of Joab. The Israelites and Absalom camped in the land of Gilead.

When David came to Mahanaim, Shobi, the son of Nahash from Rabbah, the Ammonites, and Machia, the son of Amiel from Lodibar, and Barzillia, the Gileadite from Rogalem, brought bedding and bowls and articles of pottery.

They also brought wheat and barley, flour and roasted grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep and cheese from cow's milk for David and his people to eat.

[4 : 31] For they said, the people have become exhausted and hungry and thirsty in the wilderness. Well, let me pray and ask for God's blessing as we look at his word together.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we confess that these ancient words are your words. This is the story of your work.

And this is not just simply what you have said in the past, but is what you're saying to us today. So we pray that with both tender hearts and eager ears, we might listen to hear what you are saying to us.

Oh, Lord, we are in great need of your word to us. So by your spirit, be at work in our hearts, be at work in me, I pray for the glory of your name. Amen.

Amen. There's a way of thinking. I don't know. Perhaps you might think like this this morning. That assumes that if something is easy or it comes naturally, it must therefore be right.

[5 : 35] I think in our modern speak, we tend to call it being true to ourselves. And it is the trump card of modern culture, isn't it? If you do something that might otherwise be considered really immoral and really objectionable and horrendous, if you do it because you're, quote, being true to yourself, well, then you'll let off the hook.

So if you abandon your children and your partner, it would be considered a bad thing to do. But if you're doing it because you have discovered your true sexuality, which you had repressed for years, well, then that might be OK, because you are being, quote, true to yourself.

If you drop out of school and flunk your exams and do no work at all, generally, that would be considered a very bad idea. But if you're doing it to chase a dream, even an unrealistic dream, well, then that's OK, isn't it?

Because you're being real. You're being true to yourself. I think we find ourselves as a culture, perhaps in a place that no culture has ever been before, where for the very first time, desires and longings are not seen as something to channel and curb, but seen instead as the authority in life, the teachers of what we are to do.

Because life is really about, in our culture, being who I really am. And my desires are my map in life. Now, it won't surprise you, perhaps, that this morning, 2 Samuel chapter 17 is going to give you a very different version of what life is for and what life is about to that version of events.

[7 : 13] 2 Samuel chapter 17 suggests that you live in a world not so much governed by your desires as the dictation of what is right or wrong, but in a world which is ruled by a sovereign God who rules over all things.

In fact, 2 Samuel 17 introduces us to a God who is so sovereign that even the desires of my own heart and what I want to do are also in his hands.

And that the opportunity to follow my desires might not be a sign of his blessing, but might be, like they were for Absalom, a sign of his judgment. Here is, if you like, is the alternative version of reality that's set out in 2 Samuel chapter 17.

Just because you want to do something and just because you have the opportunity to do it does not mean that it is right for you to do it and could mean that you are under God's judgment.

So perhaps it's an immoral relationship. Perhaps it's a driving attitude that puts yourself first and puts others down. Perhaps it's an easy come, easy go spiritual laziness that takes the plans and wishes of God with a pinch of salt.

[8 : 22] Maybe it's the open door to self-glory and success. That, says 2 Samuel 17, is not the blessing you think it is. In fact, it is God handing us over to a judgment he has planned for us.

Now, that is sobering truth, isn't it? Let me try and prove that to you from 2 Samuel 17 and then we'll come on to think about it some more. If you've not been with us before in the series of 2 Samuel, let me try and catch you up with what's going on.

King David, God's King David over Israel, is on the run from his rebel son Absalom. Absalom has booted his dad out of Jerusalem and out of his palace.

And in last week's story, had sex with his father's wives in a public act of defiance against him. That's all in the previous chapters. And chapter 17 is all about what's happening next and where all this is going.

And it starts with a man with a plan, the man Ahithophel. Ahithophel is formerly David's most trusted counselor and advisor. And he's now a defector to Absalom.

[9 : 22] And he's worked out exactly how David is going to be defeated. So Ahithophel has worked out that David will be tired. He knows David's been on the run for days.

He knows that he was poorly prepared for leaving Jerusalem and he's ill-equipped. He knows that David's defensive troops have yet to be organized, probably not even fed. And he also knows that only one man needs to die for Absalom to win the kingdom.

And that man is David. So his advice is, listen, chapter 17, right at the beginning. Don't waste any time, Absalom. Don't waste any time. Let me lead a small band, just about 12,000 men.

That's all I need. And we'll go, we'll kill David. We'll only kill David. That's all we need to do. We'll kill David and the kingdom will be yours. Now, before we move on, you've got to notice this is an absolutely brilliant plan by Ahithophel.

The writer goes out of his way to make sure that you know that Ahithophel is absolutely right, that David and his men are weak and vulnerable. The writer has underlined it to us at least twice. So once in chapter 16, verse 14, and again at the end of chapter 17, in verse 29, it is underlined how tired David is.

- [10 : 30] Ahithophel is right. Then the elders of Israel all agree with the plan in verse 4, and it seems as if the messengers in verse 21 just assume that Ahithophel's plan is going to be implemented. But despite all that, his plan fails.

Why does his plan fail? Verse 14. This is the key verse. We looked at it with the children. For the Lord had determined, literally the word there is ordained, to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom.

If you're in the habit of underlining verses in your Bible, that is the verse to underline in this chapter. If you're in a church Bible, please don't do it. But if you're in your own Bible, you can underline that verse. Chapter 17 is the display of God's power to ordain what happens even against Ahithophel's advice.

Really, in a sense, this is God versus Ahithophel. Let me show you what I mean. If you take a look at chapter 16 and verse 23, you'll notice that Ahithophel's advice in Israel is like one who has inquired of God.

Ahithophel is right up there. He's no dumb upstart. He's no intern in the palace. He is like the guy, right? He is the man who knows what he's doing. He's the Sue Gray or the Dominic Cummings of his day.

- [11 : 48] He's the Arnie slot of football, right? He knows exactly what's going on. He knows what to say and what to do. He's that smart kid in class who always has the answers to the questions.

But chapter 17 tells you that for all the respect that he has, despite his advice being thought of like the word of God, still in chapter 17, Ahithophel finds himself powerless.

And that contrast comes out, especially in the use of the word in verse 14, of determined or ordained or command. It's a contrast word.

So it's used of God in verse 14, the word command or give instruction or determination. But it is used again in verse 23 of our chapter, when if you notice Ahithophel goes back to his house, he saddles his donkey, he goes home, and he, we're told, puts his house in order.

It's the same word. He determines, he ordains. He ordains the things in his house and kills himself. The comparison here is, is God ordains what is going to happen while Ahithophel is organizing the pencils on his desk, right?

- [12 : 56] All that Ahithophel can do is like organize his desk. God is ordaining what is happening in the world. God commands everything. Ahithophel commands nothing. God is big and super smart.

Ahithophel is very, very small. And that background work of a sovereign God to defeat Ahithophel and through him Absalom stands behind this whole story. So it's God's sovereignty there in verse 5, when Absalom decides to take Hushai the archite to give his opinion on Ahithophel's plan.

Again, if you don't know the story, Hushai is David's insider in the palace. David sent Hushai back in order just to spy on what was going on and to try and frustrate Absalom and Ahithophel.

And so Absalom gives Hushai an overview of Ahithophel's plan in verse 6 and says, Hushai, what do you think about this plan of Ahithophel? And Hushai is on a mission, isn't he, to defeat Ahithophel.

And so he accuses Ahithophel of underestimating David. He says, oh no, listen, this is a bad plan. Ahithophel hasn't realized that David's like a man, you know, who is angry.

[14 : 07] He's like a raging bear robbed of his cubs. But I want you just to notice with me just how clever this is and what's going on here. Notice the difference between what Ahithophel says and what Hushai says.

So have a look at verse 1 and notice what Ahithophel says. I think there's only so many times in a sermon you can say Ahithophel before you just kind of lose the power of speech, right?

I'm getting there slowly. He says this, notice all the I words. This is Ahithophel speaking. I would choose 12,000 men and set out tonight in pursuit of David.

I would attack him while he is weary and weak. I would strike him with terror. Then all the people with him will flee. I would strike down only the king and bring back the people to you.

The death of the man you seek will mean the return of all. All the people will be unharmed. That's what Ahithophel says. Notice the difference between what Hushai says in verse 11. I advise you, says Hushai, let all Israel, all Israel, everybody from Dan to Beersheba, as numerous as the sand on the seashore, be gathered to you, Absalom.

[15 : 13] Let them all come to you. Then you yourself, you, Absalom, you can ride them all into battle. Then we will attack wherever he may be found and we will fall on him as the Jew settles on the ground.

Neither he nor any of his men will be left alive. It will be a great, great victory, Absalom. If he withdraws into a city, then all Israel will bring ropes to that city and we will drag it down to the valley until not so much as a pebble is left.

See, here's the thing, right? Ahithophel knows exactly how to defeat David, right? Hushai knows exactly how to play Absalom. He knows Absalom is vain.

And so he plays him, doesn't he? He flatters him, places him at the center of this great victory with all of Israel behind him, pulling down every stone, not leaving any supporter alive. You know, Absalom just can't resist that kind of talk.

Oh, yes, that sounds fantastic. I love that. That's a great plan. And then what happens is that Hushai uses the communication link that he'd set up when David fled. He tells the priests, Zadok and Abathar, who then pass the message to their sons, Jonathan and Himaz, via a servant girl.

[16 : 19] But they're seen doing it and Absalom sends men after them. So they run, dive down a well in Bahurim before getting the message eventually to David, who then crosses the Jordan River at night to be safe.

Now, that's a quick run through the story. But I want you just to zoom out for a moment. Okay, that's what's going on. Just kind of, let's come to kind of 10,000 feet and zoom out and have a look at what's going on. What you notice in 2 Samuel 17 is that God is hardly mentioned, right?

He hardly mentioned. But still, because of verse 14, you know that God stands behind all of this, accomplishing the judgment of Ahithophel and Absalom. You know, there's no lightning strikers there.

There's no voice from heaven. There's no angel of death. There's no giant hailstones. In fact, what happens here is Absalom gets exactly what he wants in chapter 17. He gets exactly what he wants.

But because of verse 14, it tells you that God is in charge and he commands the judgment of Absalom through him getting what he wants.

[17 : 21] Think about what that means. It means, doesn't it, that the story of 2 Samuel 17 is the story of God commanding history to bring the exaltation of his own king.

And that means that God is behind all of the details of 2 Samuel 17. Notice that God has determined the vanity of Absalom's heart. Notice that.

It's not just that God knows that Absalom is vain. It is instead that he has determined, he has commanded, instructed, he stands over the vanity of Absalom's heart.

Not that Absalom is forced in any way to be vain. He is free. Still, God commands it and ordains it that Absalom be vain enough to listen to a faulty plan instead of a good one.

Don't mistake it. This is not a case of like human freedom versus God's plan, as if those two things are kind of antagonistic towards one another. What you've got going on in 2 Samuel 17 is not human freedom versus God's sovereignty.

[18 : 23] What you've got is human freedom and a God who is so sovereign that he can allow us to be free whilst also commanding the ends to which he's working. It's utterly mind-blowing.

So just because he wanted the big army to follow him, just because he wanted to get the glory, just because he chose what seemed to seem best to him, does not for a moment mean that God in his sovereign power is out of control.

He's in control, even over the inclinations of Absalom's heart. God is at work bringing judgment and David to the throne. Think about the empty well.

God determines the empty well as well, doesn't he? You imagine these two young men telling the story. Oh yeah, do you know what? Super risky. We were on the run. We got spotted.

So we went into this kind of like courtyard area and we did this amazing like dive down the well and then we were like ninjas. It was amazing. You should have seen it. It was brilliant. No, no, no, no.

[19 : 21] You've misunderstood the story. God provided an empty well for them to be hidden and a lying woman to cover it so that they could get away. God was behind all of that. That's what's going on.

Or what about the support of the foreign kings? It's amazing, isn't it? At the end of the story, you haven't really looked at it, but the foreign kings who come with a long list of supplies of all of David's needs.

Israel and Absalom are getting ready for the war while the Ammonites and the Gileadites are coming and supplying David's strength for a war that's bound to follow. God has ordained support for his king, even down to the level of cheese and honey and lentils and beans.

Everything there being commanded by God so that David's army will be ready for the battle that Absalom in his vanity has been tricked into fighting because God ordained it. So notice that God is in control of all things.

We're free, but God is so sovereign that Absalom is allowed his freedom, but God is in control. But notice that God's control is heading in a certain direction so that the lying, the vanity, the charity, the loyalty, both intended and unintended are all working together under the hand of a sovereign God to do what?

[20 : 31] Defeat enemies and exalt God's king, working to bring disaster on Absalom and victory to David. And like I said earlier, that's the story of the Bible, right?

The story of God's word. 1,500 years later, after King David, King Jesus comes along. And through the wicked betrayal of a friend, he brings what he thinks is going to be defeat to Jesus, but turns out to be victory for Jesus, where God silently ordains even the evil intentions and the vanity of the hearts of the Jewish leaders so much that they are freely shouting out, crucify him, crucify him, crucify him, when really what God is doing is exalting him, exalting him, exalting him, destroying the devil, defeating sin once for all.

That dynamic continues today. All things in history are working out for the exaltation of Jesus, the one who will return in power and be seen to be king of kings and lord of lords, taking his rightful place to rule and reign forever in a world remade by his power and his glory.

Every rebellion will be squashed. Every false religion will be destroyed. Every pretend to success will come to an end and king Jesus will be exalted. You could put it this way, couldn't you?

At 2 Samuel chapter 17, God is silently working for the exaltation of king David and the destruction of Absalom. But in the giant sweep of the Bible, God is working in all things for the exaltation of king Jesus and the destruction of sin.

[22 : 01] This is the point of 2 Samuel 17. Absalom, in his free desires, brought to judgment. He freely follows his own desires and is brought to judgment because God is so sovereign and is using Absalom's desires to undo him.

Now, I think you could spend all day thinking about what are the implications of a view of God that he is so sovereign that you and I are allowed to freely follow our desires even when it brings us into judgment because he's exalting his king Jesus and defeating our sin.

You can spend all day thinking about that, but we're not going to. I'm going to just draw out two things for us as we close. The first thing is this. I want you to know, beware you are free to sin.

This is the grave warning of 2 Samuel 17. If you've never thought about this before, think about this with me. That in his freedom to sin and even in his measure of success, Absalom is not being blessed by God, but is being ruined by him.

God lets him get on with it. He grants him this level of success, but it is not a sign that he is right. And so for you and I, we are not to assume that just because we are doing what we want to do, just because we are being true to ourselves and just because we're not being struck by lightning, when that happens, it doesn't mean that we're doing the right thing.

[23 : 26] It turns out that every desire is not to be followed. Our vanity, our covetousness, our lust, our pride, our anger, all of those internal motivations, I am absolutely free to indulge in.

I can go mad and nothing will stop me, but it will never threaten God's power to hold me to account. Absalom is free to sin, but God is still in control and it brings him to disaster.

Let me say to you this morning, becoming a Christian, becoming a Christian is not accepting a few truths that you didn't know before and just going, oh yeah, okay, I now believe those tick, right?

Becoming a Christian is not that. Becoming a Christian is surrender. That's what becoming a Christian is. It is surrendering to Jesus. You know, I think we often think, don't we, that becoming a Christian, maybe it's a promise to turn over a new leaf and say, actually, I'm going to be better than I was before and God's going to be happy with me.

I'm going to come to church more regularly and God's going to like that. Maybe you even think that becoming a Christian is about saying, actually, in my life, God is on my side. You know, I've got all these things that I want to do and God is on my side to bless me.

[24 : 36] We even talk, don't we, about inviting Jesus into our hearts. But you know, that's not what a Christian is. Being a Christian is not about God surrendering to my plans.

It's about me surrendering to his, me surrendering to him. Becoming a Christian is, is this, it starts like this, becoming a Christian.

Actually, this is how being a Christian carries on. If you're a Christian this morning, this is what you pray every day. You know, Lord, that freedom that you've given me, that ability that I have to do what I want to do.

I'm making a terrible mess of that. Lord, please forgive me. I give up any pretense that I'm in charge of my own life. I give, give up any claim I have on my own life.

Lord, I submit to you. Lord, I give up to you. Lord, I want to live under your good rule and I don't want to live for myself anymore. Lord, I surrender. I give up.

[25 : 32] You know, the truth is in the story of the Bible, the choice is, will you surrender today? Or will you wait until the day when everybody has to surrender? That's the choice.

There is a day coming. Jesus wins, right? And there's a day coming when you will meet King Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And you will either submit to him in eternal torments of hell or in the glories of heaven, because you submitted to him before you met him.

So let me ask you, and can I invite you this morning to surrender to Jesus? Maybe you've never done that before. Perhaps you've done it a million times before, but let's do it again.

In our hearts, let's say, Jesus, you're King, not me. I surrender to you. I lay it all down for you. We're free to sin. So we must surrender.

Finally, then, Jesus will always win. Jesus will always win. This is clearly the main point of the passage. I hope that's ringing in your ears, at least. 2 Samuel chapter 17 tells you that God, God in his sovereign power, will command or determine all things to establish the rule of his anointed king.

[26 : 44] All things will establish the rule of King Jesus. Even death and hell cannot stand in his way. The wicked motives of our hearts, the jealous motives of the religious leaders of his day, the clever plans of wise Ahithophel's, none of those can stand in God's way.

In fact, the opposite. God is so close to his creation. He is so involved in his world by his spirit. So great is his power that all things can only ever accomplish his purposes in glory.

Jesus will always win. It means, doesn't it, that the safest place in the world, really the only safe place in the world, is where? With Jesus. Think about it like this.

Imagine for a moment, like a double-sided postcard. On the front side of the postcard is the picture of the savage war of wicked betrayal and scheming wise men.

And as you look at the picture, as far as you can tell, it seems like the wicked are winning, right? It seems like there is wars and wickedness and evil and deceit and folly.

[27 : 49] The war seems to be won by wiser Hithophels, perhaps, or powerful people like Absalom. But in the corner of the postcard is that with this terrible picture on the front, there's a little symbol on the side that says, please turn over to Samuel chapter 17, verse 14, and you flip the card over.

And there's a different picture. The same wicked men are there, the same savage war, the same wicked betrayal, but above it are golden rays of sunshine, the radiance of the glorious providence of God, the one who rules over all things, and written in the sky is Jesus will always win.

And then there's an invitation, isn't there? Will you follow Jesus? Will you join Jesus? Will you surrender to him and enter his kingdom? To see that behind everything, above all things, is a God that you cannot see, who is working out his plan to exalt his son, Jesus.

And you and I this morning, we're invited, aren't we, to die with him, to rise with him, to belong to him, to lay down our schemes and our plans, to give up our own ambitions, to forget this idea that being true to ourselves is the meaning of our lives, and to say, actually the point of our lives is to follow Jesus.

To pick up bigger ambitions, more glorious than fancy clothes, or well-paid jobs, or good education. To dream about an eternity with a person that we were made for. To be ambitious for the growth of his kingdom, and not our own.

[29 : 15] To lose my little plans in his big ones. To find my joy and delight in the fact that with Jesus, no one and nothing can be defeated. There's no robbery that can take my treasure.

There's no accusation which can rob my confidence. There's no plan that can derail my future in Jesus, because God ordains all things for the victory of his son, and the defeat of his enemies. Submit to Christ in all things.

Let me pray, and then we'll sing as we respond. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that the story of our world is not the story of the victory of wicked men and women.

The story of our world is not the story of the victory of our desires, and our being true to ourselves. But the story of our world is your sovereign power to exalt King Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords.

And so we say together this morning, humbly, honestly, we submit to Jesus. We want to love him and live our lives for him.

[30 : 29] We want to lay down every pretense that we have that we can dictate our future or determine what is going to happen. We want to say rule and reign as Lord of our lives and Lord of our church.

Jesus, King Jesus, rule and reign for your glory's sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.