

# CHAPTER 17

The contest between David and Absalom is now hastening towards a crisis. It must be determined by the sword, and preparation is made accordingly in this chapter.

**I.** Absalom calls a council of war, in which Ahithophel urges despatch (v. 1-4), but Hushai recommends deliberation (v. 5-13); and Hushai's counsel is agreed to (v. 14), for vexation at which Ahithophel hangs himself (v. 23).

**II.** Secret intelligence is sent to David (but with much difficulty) of their proceedings (v. 15-21).

**III.** David marches to the other side Jordan (v. 22-24), and there his camp is victualled by some of his friends in that country (v. 27-29).

**IV.** Absalom and his forces march after him into the land of Gilead on the other side Jordan (v. 25, 26). There we shall, in the next chapter, find the cause decided by a battle: hitherto, every thing has looked black upon poor David, but now the day of his deliverance begins to dawn.

## <del>1000</del> 2 SAMUEL 17:1-14

### HUSHAI'S COUNSEL

Absalom is now in peaceable possession of Jerusalem; the palace-royal is his own, as are *the thrones of judgment, even the thrones of the house of David*. His good father reigned in Hebron, and only over the tribe of Judah, above seven years, and was not hasty to destroy his rival; his government was built upon a divine promise, the performance of which he was sure of in due time, and therefore he waited patiently in the mean time. But the young man, Absalom, not only hastens from Hebron to Jerusalem, but is impatient there till he has destroyed his father, cannot be content with his throne till he has his life; for his government is founded in iniquity, and therefore feels itself tottering and thinks itself obliged to do every thing with violence. That so profligate a wretch as Absalom should aim at the life of so good a father is not so strange (there are here and there monsters in

nature); but that the body of the people of Israel, to whom David had been so great a blessing in all respects, should join with him in his attempt, is very amazing. But their fathers often mutinied against Moses. The best of parents, and the best of princes will not think it strange if they be made uneasy by those who should be their support and joy, when they consider what sons and what subjects David himself had.

David and all that adhered to him must be cut off. This was resolved, for aught that appears, *nemine contradicente* — *unanimously*. None durst mention his personal merits, and the great services done to his country, in opposition to this resolve, nor so much as ask, “*Why, what evil has he done to forfeit his crown, much less his head?*” None durst propose that his banishment should suffice, for the present, nor that agents should be sent to treat with him to resign the crown, which, having so tamely quitted the city, they might think he would easily be persuaded to do. It was not long since that Absalom himself fled for a crime, and David contented himself with his being an exile, though he deserved death, nay, he mourned and longed for him; but so perfectly void of all natural affection is this ungrateful Absalom that he eagerly thirsts after his own father's blood. It is past dispute that David must be destroyed; all the question is how he may be destroyed.

**I.** Ahithophel advises that he be pursued immediately, this very night, with a flying army (which he himself undertakes the command of), that the king only be smitten and his forces dispersed, and then the people that were now for him would fall in with Absalom of course, and there would not be such a long war as had been between the house of Saul and David: *The man whom thou seekest is as if all returned*, v. 1-3. By this it appears that Absalom had declared his design to be upon David's life, and Ahithophel concurs with him in it. *Smite the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered*, and be an easy prey to the wolf. Thus he contrives to include the war in a little compass, by fighting neither with small nor great but the king of Israel only, and to conclude it in a little time, by falling upon him immediately. Nothing could be more fatal to David than the taking of these measures. It was too true that he was weary and weak-handed, that a little thing would make him afraid, else he would not have fled from his house upon the first alarm of Absalom's rebellion; it was probable enough that upon a fierce attack, especially in the night, the small force he had would be put into confusion and disorder, and it would be an easy thing to *smite the king only*, and then the business would be done, the whole nation would be

reduced, of course, and *all the people*, says he, *shall be in peace*. See how a general ruin is called by usurpers a *general peace*; but thus the devil's palace is in peace, while he, as a strong man armed, keeps it. Compare with this the plot of Caiaphas (that second Ahithophel) against the Son of David, to crush his interest by destroying him. Let that *one man die for the people*, <sup><115></sup>John 11:50. *Kill the heir, and the inheritance shall be ours*, <sup><116></sup>Matthew 21:38. But the counsel of them both was turned into foolishness. Yet the children of light may, in their generation, learn wisdom from the children of this world. What our hand finds to do let us do quickly, and with all our might. It is prudence to be vigorous and expeditious, and not to lose time, particularly in our spiritual warfare. If Satan flee from us, let us follow our blow. Those that have quarrelled with crowned heads have generally observed the decorum of declaring only against their evil counsellors, and calling them to an account (*The king himself can do no wrong*, it is they that do it); but Absalom's bare-faced villany strikes at the king directly, nay, at the king only; for (would you think it?) this saying, *I will smite the king only*, pleased Absalom well (v. 4), nor had he so much sense of humor and virtue left him to pretend to startle at it or even to be reluctant in this barbarous and monstrous resolution. What good can stand before the heat of a furious ambition?

**II.** Hushai advises that they be not too hasty in pursuing David, but take time to draw up all their force against him, and to overpower him with numbers, as Ahithophel had advised to take him by surprise. Now Hushai, in giving this counsel, really intended to serve David and his interest, that he might have time to send him notice of his proceedings, and that David might gain time to gather an army and to remove into those countries beyond Jordan, in which, lying more remote, Absalom had probably least interest. Nothing would be of greater advantage to David in this juncture than time to turn himself in; that he may have this, Hushai counsels Absalom to do nothing rashly, but to proceed with caution and secure his success by securing his strength. Now,

**1.** Absalom gave Hushai a fair invitation to advise him. All the elders of Israel approved of Ahithophel's counsel, yet God overruled the heart of Absalom not to proceed upon it, till he had consulted Hushai (v. 5): *Let us hear what he saith*. Herein he thought he did wisely (two heads are better than one), but God taketh the wise in their own craftiness. See Mr. Poole's note on this.

2. Hushai gave very plausible reasons for what he said.

(1.) He argued against Ahithophel's counsel, and undertook to show the danger of following his advice. It is with modesty, and all possible deference to Ahithophel's settled reputation, that he begs leave to differ from him, v. 7. He acknowledges that the counsel of Ahithophel is usually the best, and such as may be relied on; but, with submission to that noble peer, he is of opinion that his counsel is not good at this time, and that it is by no means safe to venture so great a cause as that in which they are now engaged upon so small a number, and such a hasty sally, as Ahithophel advises, remembering the defeat of Israel before Ai, <sup><0070></sup>Joshua 7:4. It has often proved of bad consequence to despise an enemy. See how plausibly Hushai reasoned.

[1.] He insisted much upon it that David was a great soldier, a man of great conduct, courage, and experience; all knew and owned this, even Absalom himself: "*Thy father is a man of war* (v. 8), *a mighty man* (v. 10), and not so weary and weak-handed as Ahithophel imagines. His retiring from Jerusalem must be imputed, not to his cowardice, but his prudence."

[2.] His attendants, though few, were mighty men (v. 8), valiant men (v. 10), men of celebrated bravery and versed in all the arts of war. Ahithophel, who perhaps had worn the gown more than the sword, would find himself an unequal match for them. *One of them would chase a thousand.*

[3.] They were all exasperated against Absalom, who was the author of all this mischief, were chafed in their minds, and would fight with the utmost fury; so that, what with their courage, and what with their rage, there would be no standing before them, especially for such raw soldiers as Absalom's generally were. Thus did he represent them as formidable as Ahithophel had made them despicable.

[4.] He suggested that probably David and some of his men would lie in ambush, in some pit, or other close place, and fall upon Absalom's soldiers before they were aware the terror of which would put them to flight; and the defeat, though but of a small party, would dispirit all the rest, especially their own consciences at the same time accusing them of treason against one that, they were sure, was not only God's anointed, *but a man after his own heart*, v. 9. "It will soon be given out that there is a slaughter among Absalom's men, and then they will all make the best of their way, and the

heart of Ahithophel himself, though now it seems like the heart of a lion, will utterly melt. In short, he will not find it so easy a matter to deal with David and his men as he thinks it is; and, if he be foiled, we shall all be routed.”

(2.) He offered his own advice, and gave his reasons; and,

[1.] He counselled that which he knew would gratify Absalom's proud vain-glorious humour, though it would not be really serviceable to his interest. *First*, He advised that all Israel should be gathered together, that is, the militia of all the tribes. His taking it for granted that they are all for him, and giving him an opportunity to see them all together under his command, would gratify him as much as any thing. *Secondly*, He advises that Absalom go to battle in his own person, as if he looked upon him to be a better soldier than Ahithophel, more fit to give command and have the honour of the victory, insinuating that Ahithophel had put a slight upon him in offering to go without him. See how easy it is to betray proud men, by applauding them, and feeding their pride.

[2.] He counselled that which seemed to secure the success, at last, infallibly, without running any hazard. For, if they could raise such vast numbers as they promised themselves, wherever they found David they could not fail to crush him. *First*, If in the field, they should fall upon him, as the dew that covers the face of the ground, and cut off all his men with him, v. 12. Perhaps Absalom was better pleased with the design of cutting off all the men that were with him, having a particular antipathy to some of David's friends, than with Ahithophel's project of smiting the king only. Thus Hushai gained his point by humouring his revenge, as well as his pride. *Secondly*, If in a city, they need not fear conquering him, for they should have hands enough, if occasion were, to draw the city itself into its river with ropes, v. 13. This strange suggestion, how impracticable soever, being new, served for an amusement, and recommended itself by pleasing the fancy, for they would all smile at the humour of it.

(3.) By all these arts, Hushai gained not only Absalom's approbation of his advice, but the unanimous concurrence of this great counsel of war; they all agreed that the counsel of Hushai was better than the counsel of Ahithophel, v. 14. See here,

[1.] How much the policy of man can do; If Hushai had not been there, Ahithophel's counsel would certainly have prevailed; and, though all had

given their opinion, nothing could be really more for Absalom's interest than that which he advised; yet Hushai, with his management, brings them all over to his side, and none of them are aware that he says all this in favour of David and his interest, but all say as he says. See how the unthinking are imposed upon by the designing part of mankind; what tools, what fools, great men make of one another by their intrigues; and what tricks there are often in courts and councils, which those are happiest that are least conversant with.

[2.] See how much more the providence of God can do. Hushai managed the plot with dexterity, yet the success is ascribed to God, and his agency on the minds of those concerned: *The Lord had appointed to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel*. Be it observed, to the comfort of all that fear God, he turns all men's hearts as the rivers of water, though *they know not the thoughts of the Lord*. *He stands in the congregation of the mighty*, has an overruling hand in all counsels and a negative voice in all resolves, and laughs at men's projects against his anointed.

## ~~<0175>~~ 2 SAMUEL 17:15-21

### INFORMATION SENT TO DAVID

We must now leave David's enemies pleasing themselves with the thoughts of a sure victory by following Hushai's counsel, and sending a summons, no doubt, to all the tribes of Israel, to come to the general rendezvous at a place appointed, pursuant to that counsel; and we next find David's friends consulting how to get him notice of all this, that he might steer his course accordingly. Hushai tells the priests what had passed in council, v. 15. But, it should seem, he was not sure but that yet Ahithophel's counsel might be followed, and was therefore jealous lest, if he made not the best of his way, the king would be *swallowed up, and all the people that were with him*, v. 16. Perhaps, as he was called in to give advice (v. 5), so he was dismissed before they came to that resolve (v. 14) in favour of his advice, or he feared they might afterwards change their mind. However, it was good to provide against the worst, and therefore to hasten those valuable lives out of the reach of these destroyers. Such strict guards did Absalom set upon all the avenues to Jerusalem that they had much ado to get this necessary intelligence to David.

**1.** The young priests that were to be the messengers were forced to retire secretly out of the city, by *En-rogel*, which signifies, as some say, *the fountain of a spy*. Surely it went ill with Jerusalem when two such faithful priests as they were might not be seen to come into the city.

**2.** Instructions were sent to them by a poor simple young woman, who probably went to that well under pretence of fetching water, v. 17. If she carried the message by word of mouth, there was danger of her making some mistake or blunder in it; but Providence can make an ignorant girl a trusty messenger, and serve its wise counsels by the foolish things of the world.

**3.** Yet, by the vigilance of Absalom's spies, they were discovered, and information was brought to Absalom of their motions: *A lad saw them and told him*, v. 18.

**4.** They, being aware that they were discovered, sheltered themselves in a friend's house in Bahurim, where David had refreshed himself but just before, <sup><1064></sup>2 Samuel 16:14. There they were happily hidden in a well, which now, in summer time, perhaps was dry, v. 18. The woman of the house very ingeniously covered the mouth of the well with a cloth, on which she spread corn to dry, so that the pursuers were not aware that there was a well; else they would have searched it, v. 19. Thus far the woman did well; but we know not how to justify her further concealing them with a lie, v. 20. We must not do evil that good may come of it. However, hereby the messengers were protected, and the pursuers were defeated and returned to Absalom without their prey. It was well that Absalom did not hereupon fall upon their two fathers, Zadok and Abiathar, as Saul on Ahimelech for his kindness to David: but God restrained him. Being thus preserved, they brought their intelligence very faithfully to David (v. 21), with this advice of his friends, that he should not delay to pass over Jordan, near to which, it seems, he now was. There, as some think, he penned the 42nd and 43rd Psalms, looking back upon *Jerusalem from the land of Jordan*, <sup><996></sup>Psalms 42:6.

## 2 SAMUEL 17:22-29

### AHITHOPHEL'S DEATH

Here is,

**I.** The transporting of David and his forces over Jordan, pursuant to the advice he had received from his friends at Jerusalem, v. 22. He, and all that were with him, went over in the night, whether in ferryboats, which probably always plied there, or through the fords, does not appear. But special notice is taken of this, that there lacked not one of them: none deserted him, though his distress was great, none staid behind sick or weary, nor were any lost or cast away in passing the river. Herein some make him a type of the Messiah, who said, in a difficult day, *Of all that thou hast given me have I lost none*. Having got over Jordan, he marched many miles forward to Mahanaim, a Levites' city in the tribe of Gad, in the utmost border of that tribe, and not far from Rabbah, the chief city of the Ammonites. This city, which Ishbosheth had made his royal city (2 Samuel 2:8), David now made his head-quarters, v. 24. And now he had time to raise an army wherewith to oppose the rebels and give them a warm reception.

**II.** The death of Ahithophel, v. 23. He died by his own hands, *felo de se* — a suicide. He hanged himself for vexation that his counsel was not followed; for thereby,

**1.** He thought himself slighted, and an intolerable slur cast upon his reputation for wisdom. His judgment always used to sway at the counsel-board, but now another's opinion is thought wiser and better than his. His proud heart cannot bear the affront; it rises and swells, and the more he thinks of it the more violent his resentments grow, till they bring him at last to this desperate resolve not to live to see another preferred before him. All men think him a wise man, but he thinks himself the only wise man; and therefore to be avenged upon mankind for not thinking so too, he will die, that wisdom may die with him. The world is not worthy of such an oracle as he is, and therefore he will make them know the want of him. See what real enemies those are to themselves that think too well of themselves, and what mischiefs those run upon that are impatient of contempt. That will break a proud man's heart that will not break a humble man's sleep.



2. He thought himself endangered and his life exposed. He concluded that, because his counsel was not followed, Absalom's cause would certainly miscarry, and then, whoever would find David's mercy, he concluded that he, who was the greatest criminal, and had particularly advised him to lie with his father's concubines, must be sacrificed to justice. To prevent therefore the shame and terror of a public and solemn execution, he does justice upon himself, and, after his reputation for wisdom, by this last act puts a far greater disgrace upon himself than Absalom's privy-council had put upon him, and answers his name *Ahithophel*, which signifies, *the brother of a fool*. Nothing indicates so much folly as self-murder. Observe, How deliberately he did it, and of malice prepense against himself; not in a heat, but he went home to his city, to his house, to do it; and, which is strange, took time to consider of it, and yet did it. And, to prove himself *compos mentis* — *in his senses*, when he did it, he first put his household in order, made his will as a man of sane memory and understanding, settled his estate, balanced his accounts; yet he that had sense and prudence enough to do this had not consideration enough to revoke the sentence his pride and passion had passed upon his own neck, nor so much as to suspend the execution of it till he saw the event of Absalom's rebellion. Now herein we may see,

(1.) Contempt poured upon the wisdom of man. He that was more renowned for policy than any man played the fool with himself more abundantly. *Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom*, when he sees him that was so great an oracle dying *as a fool dies*.

(2.) Honour done to the justice of God. When the wicked are thus *snared in the work of their own hands, and sunk in a pit of their own digging, the Lord is known by the judgment which he executeth*, and we must say, *Higgaion, Selah*; it is a thing to be marked and meditated upon, <sup><1075></sup> Psalm 7:15, 16.

(3.) Prayer answered, and an honest cause served even by its enemies. Now, as David had prayed, Ahithophel's counsel was *turned into foolishness to himself*. Dr. Lightfoot supposes that David penned the 55th Psalm upon occasion of Ahithophel's being in the plot against him, and that he is the man complained of (v. 13) that had been *his equal, his guide, and his acquaintance*; and, if so, this was an immediate answer to his prayer there (v. 15): *Let death seize upon them, and let them go down quickly into hell*. Ahithophel's death was an advantage to David's interest; for had

he digested that affront (as those must resolve often to do that will live in this world), and continued his post at Absalom's elbow, he might have given him counsel afterwards that might have been of pernicious consequence to David. It is well that that breath is stopped and that head laid from which nothing could be expected but mischief. It seems, it was not then usual to disgrace the dead bodies of self-murderers, for Ahithophel was *buried*, we may suppose honourably buried, *in the sepulchre of his father*, though he deserved no better than the *burial of an ass*. See <sup><1080></sup>Ecclesiastes 8:10.

**III.** Absalom's pursuit of his father. He had now got all the men of Israel with him, as Hushai advised, and he himself, at the head of them, *passed over Jordan*, v. 24. Not content that he had driven his good father to the utmost corner of his kingdom, he resolved to chase him out of the world. He *pitched in the land of Gilead* with all his forces, ready to give David battle, v. 26. Absalom made one Amasa his general (v. 25), whose father was by birth Jether, an Ishmaelite (<sup><1027></sup>1 Chronicles 2:17), but by religion Ithra (as he is here called), an Israelite; probably he was not only proselyted, but, having married a near relation of David's, was, by some act of the state, naturalized, and is therefore called an Israelite. His wife, Amasa's mother, was Abigail, David's sister, whose other sister, Zeruah, was Joab's mother (<sup><1026></sup>1 Chronicles 2:16), so that Amasa was in the same relation to David that Joab was. In honour to his family, even while he was in arms against his father, Absalom made him commander-in-chief of all his forces. Jesse is here called *Nahash*, for many had two names; or perhaps this was his wife's name.

**IV.** The friends David met with in this distant country. Even Shobi, a younger brother of the royal family of the Ammonites, was kind to him, v. 27. It is probable that he had detested the indignity which his brother Hanun had done to David's ambassadors, and for that had received favours from David, which he now returned. Those that think their prosperity most confirmed know not but, some time or other, they may stand in need of the kindness of those that now lie at their mercy, and may be glad to be beholden to them, which is a reason why we should, as we have opportunity, *do good to all men, for he that watereth shall be watered also himself*, when there is occasion. Machir, the son of Ammiel, was he that maintained Mephibosheth (<sup><1004></sup>2 Samuel 9:4), till David eased him of that charge, and is now repaid for it by that generous man, who, it seems, was

the common patron of distressed princes. Barzillai we shall hear of again. These, compassionating David and his men, now that they were weary with a long march, brought him furniture for his house, *beds and basins*, and provision for his table, *wheat and barley*, etc., v. 28, 29. He did not put them under contribution, did not compel them to supply him, much less plunder them; but in token of their dutiful affection to him, and their sincere concern for him in his present straits, of their own good will they brought in plenty of all that which he had occasion for. Let us learn hence to be generous and open-handed, according as our ability is, to all in distress, especially great men, to whom it is most grievous, and good men, who deserve better treatment; and see how God sometimes makes up to his people that comfort from strangers which they are disappointed of in their own families.