

2 Samuel 18:1-33

Absalom's Defeat and Death

Knowing that David is a type of the Messiah, we can see multiple reflections and snapshots of Jesus in his story. Here the death of Absalom gives us a picture of one side of the cross - the death of ourselves, sinful and rebellious Adam, left hanging from a tree, cursed and "between heaven and earth." At the same time we have a also a different perspective - the love of the Father for his children.

In Joab's piercing of Absalom with spears we even see a shadow of the Roman soldier piercing Jesus' side on the cross (**John 19:34**).

Finally, David's cry in **verse 33** - "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

What David could not do, God did by dying in the place of rebellious sinners. -

(See David Guzik, https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/guzik_david/study-guide/2-samuel/2-samuel-18.cfm)

2 Samuel 18:1 - "And David numbered the people that were with him, and set captains of thousands and captains of hundreds over them. And David sent forth a third part of the people under the hand of Joab, and a third part under the hand of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and a third part under the hand of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said unto the people, I will surely go forth with you myself also."

David, not wanting to repeat his error of remaining at Jerusalem during a battle, which led to his affair with Bathsheba, says he will lead the forces against Absalom.

It's interesting that a third of David's forces are led by the Gentile Ittai the Gittite.

- **Isaiah 49:3** - "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth"

- **Genesis 22:18** - "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice."

2 Samuel 18:3 - "But the people answered, Thou shalt not go forth: for if we flee away, they will not care for us; neither if half of us die, will they care for us: but now thou art worth ten thousand of us: therefore now it is better that thou succour us out of the city."

"succour us" - David would be ready to come with reinforcements if needed. But the rabbis add that he would also aid them with prayer.

Also, perhaps they sensed that David might be reluctant to fight against his own son.

2 Samuel 18:4 - "And the king said unto them, What seemeth you best I will do. And the king stood by the gate side, and all the people came out by hundreds and by thousands."

David was humble enough to listen to his advisors, as a good leader should.

A Plea for Absalom's Life

2 Samuel 18:5 - "And the king commanded Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, Deal gently for my sake with the young man, even with Absalom. And all the people heard when the king gave all the captains charge concerning Absalom."

David wanted Absalom captured and not killed. David knew this as all happening as a judgment from God, and felt Absalom was merely a tool in God's hand, and so ultimately not completely responsible.

2 Samuel 18:6-8 - "So the people went out into the field against Israel: and the battle was in the wood of Ephraim; Where the people of Israel were slain before the servants of David, and there was there a great slaughter that day of twenty thousand men. For the battle was there scattered over the face of all the country: and the wood devoured more people that day than the sword devoured."

Rashi - "Now how was there a forest belonging to Ephraim on the Eastern bank of the Jordan since no portion was granted [anyone] there other than to the children of Gad, Reuben, and Menashe? However, because Joshua had placed as a condition [for the division of the Land of Israel] that anyone may pasture in the forests, and since this forest was so close to Ephraim, [but for the Jordan separating them] that they [the people of Ephraim] would pasture their animals there, it was called the forest of Ephraim."

This was treacherous land, and David arranged for the battle to take place there where Absalom's superior numbers would not be an advantage. The ground was full of crevasses and gorges, tangled with brush and trees. Like a scene from Lord of the Rings, the forest "devoured" the soldiers of Asbalom. The Targum of Jonathan adds that beasts of the woods attacked them as well.

Absalom Gets Snagged

2 Samuel 18:9 - "And Absalom met the servants of David. And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away."

"he was taken up between the heaven and the earth" - this is a strange phrase that tells us to look for something deeper.

Legends of the Jews - "Absalom's end was beset with terrors. When he was caught in the branches of the oak-tree, he was about to sever his hair with a sword stroke, but suddenly he saw hell yawning beneath him, and he preferred to hang in the tree to throwing himself into the abyss alive. Absalom's crime was, indeed, of a nature to deserve the supreme torture, for which reason he is one of the few Jews who have no portion in the world to come."

The Terebinth Tree

He was caught in a Terebinth tree, not an oak. The terebinth is where today we get turpentine, but in ancient times it was used for medicinal purposes, as well as to sweeten wine.

the Hebrew term that refers to the terebinth tree is the feminine noun *elah*, which translators often confused with the masculine *ellón*, meaning "oak". Therefore the "oak of Moreh" (**Deuteronomy 11:30**), the "oak at Shechem" (**Genesis 35:4**), "the oaks of Mamre" (**Genesis. 18:1**) where the Lord appeared to Abraham, were not oak trees but terebinths.

But terebinths also formed part of the groves where Canaanite idols were worshipped and sex rituals took place.

- **Hosea 4:13** - "They sacrifice on the mountaintops and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar and terebinth, where the shade is pleasant. Therefore your daughters turn to prostitution and your daughters-in-law to adultery."

Like the brass serpent lifted up by Moses in the wilderness, which represented the curse but also healing, Absalom hanging by his hair (or perhaps just his neck or head) depicts the crushing of the head of the serpent prophesied in **Genesis 3:15** as well as the healing offered to those who look on brass serpent and believe.

- **John 3:14-15** - "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

- **Deuteronomy 21:22–23** - "And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance."

- **Galatians 3:13** - "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'"

It's good to read this as we look forward to Passover, Jesus' crucifixion and the Resurrection.

The Death of Absalom

Absalom is found but left hanging because no one wanted to kill him after David's order. But Joab did not hesitate.

2 Samuel 18:14-15 - "Then said Joab, I may not tarry thus with thee. And he took three darts (spears) in his hand, and thrust them through the heart of Absalom, while he was yet alive in the midst of the oak. And ten young men that bare Joab's armour compassed about and smote Absalom, and slew him."

The 10 young men who participate in killing Absalom form sort of a minyan, analogous to the 10 concubines who Absalom had defiled.

The Mishna comments: "Because he violated his father's ten concubines, he was beaten with ten spears. Because he stole the heart of three parties - his father, the court and Israel - he had three staves thrust into his heart. (Sotah 9b). Thus the manner in which he was killed was calculated to provide him with expiation for his sins."

Joab did what was probably best for Israel and the king. By killing Absalom the battle would immediately end. David had proved he could not think straight about Absalom. But Joab was wrong to disobey the king. God could have worked his will without Joab figuring things out himself.

Absalom's Pride

Absalom's vanity and pride are on full display in this chapter.

- First, he rides on a mule, used primarily by the wealthy and the powerful, but the mule drags him into the tree where he is trapped and killed.

Why a mule? Israel's kings were forbidden from multiplying horses to themselves (**Deuteronomy 17:6**). Instead they rode mules. Since they were crossbred between a mare and a male donkey, and since crossbreeding was forbidden in Israel (**Leviticus 19:19**), mules had to be imported and thus were more valuable.

In contrast, Jesus is said to enter Jerusalem on a donkey, a more humble animal (**Matthew 21:1-9**):

- **Zechariah 9:9** - "Behold, your King is coming to you...lowly and riding on a donkey [male], a colt, the foal of a donkey [female]"

The Talmud notes: R. Joshua opposed two verses: it is written [in Daniel 7:13], And behold, one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven whilst [in Zechariah 9:9] it is written, [behold, thy king cometh unto thee . . .] lowly, and riding upon an ass! — if they are meritorious, [he will come] with the clouds of heaven; if not, lowly and riding upon an ass. - (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a)

Since none of us are “meritorious” Jesus came on a donkey to die for our sins.

- Absalom's long hair that he was so proud of snags on the tree and leads to his death. According to the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sotah 9b - “He became haughty because of his hair, so he was hanged by his hair.”

- Then we find he has already built a monument to himself in Jerusalem for people to “remember his name.”

The Messengers

2 Samuel 18:29 - “And the king said, Is the young man Absalom safe? And Ahimaaz answered, When Joab sent the king's servant, and me thy servant, I saw a great tumult, but I knew not what it was.”

David's loyal followers would have been dismayed that David asked about his rebel son first rather than how David's own soldiers had fared in the battle. When Ahimaaz realized David's state of mind, he understood Joab's warning, and decided not to reveal details of the battle or the news about Absalom's death..

The other messenger, the Cushite, was identified by the rabbis as the same soldier who had refused to kill Absalom.

The Cushite who brings David the news of Absalom's death says (**18:32**), "The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is."

Bringing the Gospel

The Cushite, who apparently ran through the hills or mountains, brings the news of the death of Absalom. Ahimaaz ran through the plain.

2 Samuel 18:23 - "...Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the plain."

2 Samuel 18:27 - Ahimaaz "...cometh with good tidings."

- **Isaiah 52:7** - "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!"

The Reckoning of the Cross

And that is what happened at the cross.

Rebellious Adam died so that the last Adam could be resurrected and we could become new creations.

Even 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' (**1 Corinthians 15:54-55**)

- **Colossians 2:14-15** - "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it."

David's cry in the last verse displays the anguish of the Father who loves all his children and wants none to die but all to come to repentance (**2 Peter 3:9**). It also includes David's realization that the rebellion and the loss of life during the battle was brought on by his own sin.

2 Samuel 18:33 - "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

David repeats Absalom's name twice. Jesus cries out Jerusalem's name twice:

- **Matthew 23:37** - "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!"