

2nd SAMUEL

Week 27, chapters 17 and 18

We began 2nd Samuel chapter 17 last week, as Absalom and his forces were now running the government of Israel from Jerusalem, and he was even occupying the royal palace named after his father in the City of David.

Absalom's partner in rebellion, Bathsheba's grandfather **Achitofel**, remained **Avishalom's** closest advisor. And since the first stage of the coup had been accomplished, and King David and a large contingent of loyal followers had fled to somewhere between Jerusalem and the Jordan River, Absalom sought Achitofel's council on what to do next. At the end of chapter 16 his advice was for Absalom was to have sex with all of the 10 concubines from David's harem that had been left behind to tend to the royal palace; and to do so literally on the rooftop of the palace! Achitofel's purpose in this rather barbaric act was for Absalom to so publically insult and marginalize his father that those who sided with Absalom knew that not the slightest prospect of reconciliation between David and his rebellious son existed any longer. Thus they wouldn't have to worry that Absalom might get cold feet about his rebellion, seek forgiveness, and stand aside for King David to return to power because in that event it would mean their execution. No King could forgive (not even his own son) for such a blatant act.

After **Avishalom** committed this offense, **Achitofel** knew that the decisive moment had arrived: David must be done away with. So he went to Absalom with a plan to take 12,000 soldiers with him and in a lightening fast strike, catch David and his contingent by surprise, and kill the former King of Israel. There is little doubt that such a brilliant plan would have worked.

But a higher power than the wisdom of this renowned councilor was guiding these events, unseen, and so inexplicably Absalom decides to get a 2nd opinion from none less than the Friend of David, **Hushai**. It is illogical; Avishalom knows full well that Hushai was deeply dedicated to David. Yet in verse 5 **Avishalom** calls for Hushai, tells him exactly what Achitofel has recommended, and wonders what Hushai thinks would be the best course of action. Hushai repudiates **Achitofel's** plan. One might reasonably ask why Absalom would see the need to validate **Achitofel's** council considering the high regard his advice was given, that

Achitofel (being the architect of the rebellion) was obviously all-in for Absalom, and that Hushai ought to have been viewed with some suspicion considering his long-time close relationship with David. Not to mention the fact that even if Absalom rejected Hushai's advice and stuck with Achitofel's plan, Hushai now knew what was going on.

I think the earthly reason that Absalom sought out Hushai is rather transparent: **Achitofel** was trying to give himself a promotion and Absalom knew it. **Achitofel** not only wanted to devise the plan to find David and kill him, he also wanted to hand pick the troops AND to be the one to lead them into battle. **Achitofel** had been a councilor to the leader, not THE leader, and certainly not a military general. If he were allowed to personally form and lead an army into battle and succeed, he would have been viewed by the public as the de facto general of the Israelite army and therefore 2nd in command over all Israel. As we'll see shortly Absalom had already selected his top general, and he must have also had no intention on giving the brilliant and ambitious **Achitofel** such a platform for power.

Thus Absalom wanted to hear from Hushai and Hushai gave him a different plan, one that minimized Achitofel's participation and instead put Absalom into public view. But it was also a plan that would likely fail, even though it appealed to Absalom's inflated view of himself. Hushai went so far as to boldly say that Achitofel's advice on this matter was bad advice.

Rather, says Hushai, Absalom needs to remember that his father David is powerful and a fierce warrior. Ittai and his men are trained and hardened fighters and they are NOT going to panic at the arrival of Achitofel's 12,000 man army; they are not going to throw down their weapons and run. Rather there will be a bloody battle as they fight like a mother bear that has lost her cubs to the hunters.

The outcome will be that as soon as some of **Achitofel's** forces are killed, they will lose courage and thus lose the battle. And even though Achitofel is leading them, this is the decisive battle between what will be forever viewed as Absalom's army and David's; and so if Absalom's army is defeated the people of Israel will see David as still strong and able to rule, and Absalom will lose support (a disaster for sure). Therefore Hushai says the better plan is to assemble a much larger force (men taken from Dan that is in the northernmost reaches of Israel, and also from all the tribes in between all the way down south to Be'er Sheva in Judah). The army will be so large and formidable that should David retreat and try to hide inside a walled city, word will be sent ahead that any fortress city who harbors him will be destroyed down to the last stone, and the rubble dragged into a riverbed (the idea is that the city will never get rebuilt since rubble at the site of the old city is what is used to rebuild a new one). Hushai further counsels that Absalom should himself lead this irresistible force that is certain to

be victorious, and that way Absalom (and not Achitofel) will be hailed as the victor. Besides, that is what real kings do.

The narcissistic and unstable Avishalom of course loves Hushai's plan, and so goes to the other leaders of the rebellion and tells them that in this rare case the nearly infallible Achitofel's advice is inferior to Hushai's; Hushai's plan is better and should be acted upon. They wholeheartedly agree.

The cunning behind Hushai's plan is that while Achitofel could put together a 12,000 man force of hand picked experienced soldiers immediately, it would take many weeks (at best) to cobble together a large militia of farmers, herders, and craftsmen from one end of Israel to the other. The resultant army would be an inexperienced and undisciplined one, and David would have gained sufficient time to flee somewhere to his advantage to prepare a defense.

Let's re-read the last half of chapter 17 to get out bearings.

RE-READ 2nd SAMUEL 17:15 – end

As further proof that it is Yehoveh who is invisibly directing these events the 2 High Priests of Israel, ***Tzadok and Evyatar*** (who David ordered to remain in Yerushalayim to serve the people and to act as informers) are utilized to help confound Absalom's intentions.

Hushai tells them to quickly get word to David to move from wherever he is camped. He informs the High Priests not only of the plan he had planted in Avishalom's mind but also of Achitofel's plan (after all, there is no way to know what Absalom might actually choose to do). The High Priests employed the services of a woman servant to go and tell their sons ***Y'honatan and Achima'atz*** (who were staying just outside the city walls, on the edge of the Mt. of Olives, at a place called En-Rogel) to find David and warn him.

They left immediately but noticed that they had been discovered by a boy who had been

instructed by Absalom to watch for just such a thing, so they sought the help of a woman who lived in Bachurim. She had a water cistern on her property (apparently empty at the time) and so hid the two men in it as Absalom's men quickly fanned out to find them.

She cleverly spread out a heavy cloth covering over the cistern and on top of it spread grain as if it was drying in order to disguise the opening. Knowing that Y'honatan and Achima'atz had headed off in that direction the soldiers questioned the woman as to their whereabouts and she lied. She told them that they had gone over the water (not "over the river"). Absalom's men looked around and not finding them, left.

This reminds us a bit of Rahab at Jericho when she hid Joshua's advance scouts and then lied to Jericho's government authorities about it. I'm often asked about matters like this in the Bible because we have well-known stories whereby friends of God tell out and out lies to protect God's people and it is typically held up in the Scriptures as a good deed. Yet, we all know that one of the 10 Commandments prohibits lying. So does telling a lie for what seems like a good cause mean that the lie becomes as truth, and thus there is no sin in it and so we are relieved of the spiritual consequences?

I think this is a conundrum that all Believers face on a rather regular basis so I want to spend just a few moments to deal with it. And the Rabbis have a wonderful (and I think most appropriate) device for dealing with this challenge called ***Kal V'homer***. It means light and heavy and the mental picture we ought to get is of a balance scales reacting to a heavier weight in one of its trays as compared to the other. As I've spoken on this before (in our study of the Torah), I remind you that the principle is that not all sin is equal. Unlike the more typical Christian doctrine that often teaches that a sin is a sin is a sin, and that pilfering a candy bar is no different in God's eyes than armed robbery because all sin is the same, that doctrine is neither the Hebrew nor the Biblical view.

The Torah explicitly teaches that there are lesser and greater sins; there are even unforgiveable sins called "high handed" sins (that in the New Testament are labeled as sins of blaspheming the Holy Spirit). The Levitical sacrificial system deals with this by prescribing sacrificial offerings of lesser or greater cost depending on the seriousness of the offense (and for the most serious offenses no atonement is available so no sacrifice will suffice). Further there are things that God has created that are more and less important in God's hierarchy of value. For instance: humans and animals are both valuable and important, but human life outweighs animal life. And near the top of God's list of valuable things is life (innocent life); thus wherever possible innocent human life is to be preserved, even if the circumstances aren't ideal (we won't be dealing with criminally guilty human life in this little detour).

The principle of **Kal V'homer** therefore says that we will encounter circumstance when one must choose between sins; so we should choose to intentionally commit the lesser sin in order to avoid the greater one. I've given the humorous (at least to men) stereotypical example of the overweight wife who asks her husband if she looks fat in her new dress; to which the answer must always be "no" if family harmony is to be kept. I've also given the sobering example of many good people in Germany in WWII who hid Jews from being murdered by the Nazis, all the while lying to their local government authorities that they didn't know the whereabouts of these missing Jews.

In the first case the lie was an act of **chesed** (loving kindness) to save the feelings and self-esteem of a wife, and in the 2nd case the lie was to literally preserve innocent life. But does the lie become as truth in God's eyes because of its noble purpose? No it doesn't. Nothing in Scripture implies such a thing; the lie remains a lie and therefore a sin.

But consider the reverse; the husband well knows on the one hand that his wife DOES look fat in that dress, and he also knows that although his wife's feelings and sense of worth will be harmed by a frank answer, he determines that he has no choice but to tell the truth or he would be guilty of the sin of lying. What if a German who knows the whereabouts of innocent Jews in hiding (because he's hiding them) tells the authorities where they are merely because they asked; because (as a Christian) he understands that it is a sin to lie as well as a sin to disobey your human government (as explained in the New Testament)? The principle of Kal V'homer says that if we were to take this approach we would be choosing to commit a GREATER sin in order to avoid a lesser sin. And the greater sin is that we would be more concerned with the consequences of our own trespass against God, than in upholding the most foundational tenant of all true Biblical religion, which is to love our neighbor as ourselves and to put their well being above our own. On God's balance scales, saving innocent life carries more weight than strict adherence of the Torah prohibition against lying to our fellow man. Loving our wives and showing them **chesed** also carries more weight than the strict adherence to the Torah prohibition against lying.

The woman in Bachurim who hid the High Priests' sons who were in process of warning David in order to save God's anointed one from death at the hands of his evil son Absalom, told a lie and defied her government authorities. But in the so-doing she also preserved innocent life and chose to stand with God's anointed above a humanly contrived government. She only had two choices before her: tell the soldiers the truth or lie to them. She did the right thing for the right reason, even though in doing so she knowingly committed the lesser sin to avoid the greater.

This is but the condition that mankind finds ourselves in (whether Believer or pagan) and it will be so until Messiah returns, rids the world of evil, and so mankind is no longer faced with such a sad choice. And thank God, this Messiah Yeshua has paid the price for both our lesser and greater sins until that future time arrives. And we have a God who is not mechanically legalistic but is merciful and looks at the spirit underlying all of His commandments and at the heart of His worshippers who seek to follow Him in obedience.

Some time after the soldiers left and the coast was clear, the woman helped **Y'honatan and Achima'atz** out of the cistern and they went and found David and gave him the message. And notice that verse 21 makes it clear that the part of the message that David must immediately act upon is what Achitofel said to Absalom; because if Absalom chose to carry out Hushai's plan, there was no particular hurry as quite some time would pass before the much larger army that Hushai suggested could be assembled (which was Hushai's intent all along).

David was at this time on the west bank of the Jordan River, but now he will take his followers and cross-over into the Trans-Jordan. Taking no chances the entire group made their move overnight.

Back in Yerushalayim, it became clear to Achitofel that Absalom was not going to follow his advice in pursuing David, and he instinctively knew that the entire revolution would collapse in failure. As Bathsheba's grandfather, Achitofel was a very bitter vindictive man who had dedicated the remainder of his days to ruining David for defiling his lovely granddaughter and thus bringing great dishonor and shame upon the family.

Failed revolutions do not end well for those who lead them. Achitofel, as do many people in all eras, decided that he would not give David the satisfaction of determining the time and means of his end, so he took control. He went back to his hometown, delivered his last will and testament, and then committed suicide by strangulation (probably hanging but that is merely a guess).

Verse 24 tells us (without explanation) that David chose to use **Machanayim** as his temporary capital and headquarters. It is a bit surprising that David would choose this particular place and one must assume that it was at least partly because he could get to it rapidly from where they currently were hiding out. The thing is that **Machanayim** was where Saul's surviving son Ishbosheth set up his capital. So there would have been a heavy Benjamite influence and many of the residents were undoubtedly still loyal to Saul's family (and therefore none too

pleased to host David). Nonetheless, this was a well fortified walled city, and it was also a Levitical city of refuge (in some ways appropriate for the situation, isn't it?) where theoretically those within the city would, by law, be held safe from those who wanted to harm them. Did David actually think that perhaps his son Avishalom would obey the Torah law and allow David and his followers to remain there, and not attack city, because of its special religious status? Maybe. Machanayim had always been a special place for Israel because it was here that Jacob, upon returning from Mesopotamia to Canaan, had another encounter with angels just before he had his reunion with Esau.

Verse 25 explains that it was a good thing David made haste and planned for the worst because no sooner had he and his people arrived in **Machanayim**, Avishalom leading his army crossed the Jordon in hot pursuit. Apparently Avishalom didn't follow the advice of either Achitofel or Hushai; he created kind a hybrid of the two. He personally led the army (as advised by Hushai), but he also brought with him a smaller force that he could muster immediately (as advised by Achitofel). The results seem to indicate that the force was a composition of his own choosing, and the troops he chose weren't particularly adept at war. Further, he put a fellow named **Amasa** in charge of the army. Now who this Amasa is, is not entirely clear. Here it says that he is the son of a man named Yitra the Israelite. But in 1Chronicles 2 it says he is the son of Yeter the Ishmaelite. While there is not full agreement on the matter, most Hebrew scholars say that his father was an Ishmaelite (an Arab), but his mother was **Avigayil**, a Hebrew. Very likely this was an illegitimate relationship and so legally **Amasa** was an illegitimate cousin of Joab's.

This might explain why it is logical that since Joab cast his loyalty to David, his cousin **Amasa** would do the opposite and cast his loyalty to David's enemy. There would be a natural animosity and rivalry between the two cousins, especially as it pertained to power and position.

We're told that "Israel and Avishalom pitched camp in the land of Gilead". Israel in this instance is a very general term that meant Absalom's army that had recruits from all the 12 tribes. It says that they encamped in Gilead. Likely this is referring to an area around the city of Jabesh-Gilead, north of David's stronghold at Machanayim. That would make sense because Jabesh-Gilead always had close ties to the tribe of Benjamin, associated themselves to the northern tribal confederation, and would have been among those tribes that had the least interest in being loyal to David, a Judahite. So they would have welcomed the enemy of David, even if that enemy was David's son.

We're also told that 3 prominent men brought every manner of supplies to David and his followers in Machanayim. No doubt these were not the only 3, but most Hebrew scholars see

these 3 as representative of certain groups or categories of people who remained loyal to King David (or at least made the bet that in the end David would be the eventual winner in this epic struggle). **Shovi** came from Rabbah, the capital city of Amon. He was actually a relative of David's but represented the extreme border inhabitants of Israel, foreigners actually, who preferred David as an ally. **Machir** from Lo-D'var was a former loyalist to King Saul, but was now part of a group of Israelites who readily accepted David as their king. **Barzillai** was from the area of Gilead and he represented the wealthy land owners of the region who also felt their best interests lay with David continuing on as king.

The idea of this extensive description of men and supplies is to show that David was not without support, nor despite his age and badly bruised reputation from his infamous deeds (mainly surrounding Bathsheba and the fallout from that) were ALL the various clans and families of Israel ready to accept Absalom as their inevitable king. Along with these supplies came a significant number of volunteers to fight alongside David.

Let's move on to chapter 18.

READ 2ND SAMUEL CHAPTER 18 all

We need to pause and take a broad view at this point; what began as a war of rebellion has just turned into a Civil War. This was the fear that the now deceased Achitofel tried to impart to Avishalom. It was one thing for a usurper to gain the backing of the right people, and to convince the general population to either help him or sit it out, in his effort to gain the throne; this was a purely political battle fought mainly between two politicians. But it was quite another when a country divided itself into two factions, one side backing one king and the other side backing another and they were willing to fight to see their man and their faction win because for them this was more of a cause than it was about self-serving political ambitions.

David, despite his flaws, was still popular enough to command the respect of many tribal princes and clans, and of the top military leaders, and of a goodly amount of trained soldiers. And since the Lord was not yet through with David, the outcome became inevitable.

The meaning of David taking a census is to be taken in military terms. It was usual for a king or a military commander to take a census of his army immediately before a significant battle not

so much to determine the size of his force (he already had a good idea of that) but to record names and pair them with battlefield units that could then be assigned to commanders. It was both a means of organization and a means to later determine how many casualties were sustained and how many troops became captives of the enemy.

So Absalom had a sizeable force (likely considerably larger than David's) but mostly they were ill-trained and undisciplined and probably only served because they were politically forced into it. David's army were led by professionals, consisted of volunteers who by their own free will chose to risk their lives for God's anointed king, and they had confidence since David was perhaps the most revered Israelite military leader since Joshua.

Using a standard Israeli military tactic David divided his troops into three divisions, led by Yo'av (David's commanding general for the past 30 years), his brother and long time commander Avishai, and Ittai the Gittite (possibly a former Philistine) who had been with David since the days he was on the run from King Saul. These were highly skilled generals leading experienced, dedicated troops; but they were outnumbered by Absalom. So when David declared he planned to personally lead them into battle, he was firmly rebuffed by the army. David was by now an old man, years removed from the battlefield. He was living on reputation. The reality is that he had been a passive, sedentary monarch for at least 20 years. Just as David knew his dear elderly friend and councilor Hushai would have valiantly followed David into the wilderness but also would have been mostly a burden and so refused to allow him to come, the army commanders now felt the same way about David. They respected him; but the physical realities of aging catch up to everyone at some point.

So they told him that he was much too valuable to come with them; the risk of his death or capture was just too great. Besides, as they rightly pointed out, David remaining alive was the crucial issue. For Absalom could not become the undisputed king until his father David was dead; as long as David lived the matter remained unsettled. Killing even 10,000 of David's soldiers would have looked good on Avishalom's resume, but it still left him short of the absolutely necessary goal: a deceased David. David accepted their verdict and hailed them as they marched out the city gates of Machanayim to war.

But David had an ulterior motive for standing by the gates that almost any parent could understand; yet that motive had no place in the mind or mouth of a man who still wanted to be God's anointed king over God's chosen people. David wanted every last soldier to know that he did not want any harm to come to Absalom. He made it clear to his 3 commanders and he made it clear to all who were within earshot; go gently with Avishalom.

A divinely anointed leader who freely chooses to enter into service to God no longer has the luxury and comfort of putting his family above everything else. David had been putting his family above his duties to Yehoveh for a very long time, and the outcome was disastrous.

It has long been a Christian saying that God comes first and family second. But my personal observation is that in practice the order is almost always reversed. In fact, those Christian leaders who do NOT reverse it are often roundly criticized by the Church in general for being so callous and uncaring towards their families, and therefore behaving in an ungodly manner. Our Savior has always warned that following Him will exact a cost, and it needs to be counted before making that commitment. And that cost doesn't come only upon the one who chooses, but often it spills over upon his entire family.

(Luk 14:26-33 CJB)

²⁶ "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father, his mother, his wife, his children, his brothers and his sisters, yes, and his own life besides, he cannot be my talmid.

²⁷ Whoever does not carry his own execution-stake and come after me cannot be my talmid.

²⁸ "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Don't you sit down and estimate the cost, to see if you have enough capital to complete it?

²⁹ If you don't, then when you have laid the foundation but can't finish, all the onlookers start making fun of you

³⁰ and say, 'This is the man who began to build, but couldn't finish!'

³¹ "Or again, suppose one king is going out to wage war with another king. Doesn't he first sit down and consider whether he, with his ten thousand troops, has enough strength to meet the other one, who is coming against him with twenty thousand?

³² If he hasn't, then while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation to inquire about terms for peace.

³³ *"So every one of you who doesn't renounce all that he has cannot be my talmid.*

And also in the Book of Luke our Messiah said:

(Luke 9:57-62 CJB)

⁵⁷ *As they were traveling on the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."*

⁵⁸ *Yeshua answered him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds flying about have nests, but the Son of Man has no home of his own."*

⁵⁹ *To another he said, "Follow me!" but the man replied, "Sir, first let me go away and bury my father."*

⁶⁰ *Yeshua said, "Let the dead bury their own dead; you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God!"*

⁶¹ *Yet another said, "I will follow you, sir, but first let me say good-bye to the people at home."*

⁶² *To him Yeshua said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and keeps looking back is fit to serve in the Kingdom of God."*