

### 2<sup>ND</sup> SAMUEL

#### Week 28, chapters 18 and 19

As we ended our previous lesson, we received a sad (almost embarrassing) narrative of the aged and worn-down King David standing at the gates of Machanayim imploring his war bound army to go gently with Avishalom. One can only imagine the perplexed (even disgruntled) reaction of his troops and commanders at such a notion that above all else they should seek not to harm the very one they are going out to battle against; the one that has caused all of this death and mayhem. And all because David had some twisted sense of loyalty and father-to-son affection towards Absalom that caused him to somehow overlook the fact that his son had become not only an enemy of David and of God's Kingdom, but of God Himself because Avishalom was trying to unseat God's anointed King.

I received a disturbing correspondence a few days ago that I think was no coincidence, and I would like to take just a couple of minutes to sermonize as this has direct relationship to our lesson. We spent a few moments last week exploring Yeshua's admonition and warning in the Book of Luke about what the attitude and expectation of a Believer must be who accepts the honor of being a leader in the community of God-worshippers (or even to what a simple follower of Yeshua must be). And ideally the acceptance of a divine commission of leadership must put obedience and duty to the Lord above all earthly treasures, even one's own family.

This is not something we see happen very often in the Christian community; most typically the actual order of importance and value that we establish in our lives is family first, then God. I won't review that part of the lesson, but I would like to make this additional comment so that there is no misunderstanding. It is not the ideal decision to FIRST create a family and THEN decide to become a devoted leader in the Kingdom (but it is probably the most common way it happens). Rather it is always best to FIRST commit to the Lord, and then evaluate IF your particular commitment will even accommodate the earthly treasure of a family. Or such a decision should play the pivotal role in choosing a spouse who must share our commitment whole-heartedly. Otherwise, unwittingly, we may have played a game of bait-and-switch that is bound to cause terrible family turmoil and pain. That is we married a person under one set of mutually agreed premises, and then later (in a one-sided decision) decided to make a right turn and pursue a whole different lifestyle and set of priorities (no matter how godly-sounding or

well intended); a set that the other spouse is not equipped for or hasn't been called by God for and maybe doesn't genuinely embrace.

Nothing is more common in Christian leadership today than for a man to marry, produce a couple of children, and then at some later point decide to commit him and his family to ministry. The good Christian wife follows along, even if reluctantly, and tries to make the best of it. The children are pawns, and have little choice in the matter. But all too often the enthusiastic husband and Christian leader suddenly finds himself with a burned-out and discouraged wife and angry children who never signed up for this.

Thus the two-part lesson is that while marrying and starting a family first is by no means a disqualification of a later participation in Christian leadership, it does necessarily narrow and limit the extent and type of assignment one can reasonably commit to. A man in this type of situation cannot be a good attentive husband and involved father and suddenly nearly abandon his family for the sake of his newfound mission, saying that God comes first. Rather because of the path that he first undertook, he must take on the commission of leadership understanding that there will be severe limitations. The second part of the lesson is that only a few are actually destined to become full-time Christian leaders. Nowhere in the Scriptures do we get the sense that we were meant to have boatloads of Christian leaders in order to lead the Messiah's flock. Unfortunately Christian leadership today has all too often become a vocation or a profession, not a true divine calling or anointing. That we might have a great desire to be a Christian leader by no means says we OUGHT to be one or that God has willed such a life for us (and by extension, for our family).

St. Paul cautioned potential leaders in the Kingdom about this as well, even advising that if possible, in the long run it is probably better for a leader to avoid marriage and family especially if your particular assignment brings with it a very uncertain earthly future. By no means am I saying or advocating (nor does the Bible say) that Christian leadership and family are mutually exclusive. Rather I'm saying: count the cost before you make either commitment (to marriage or to Christian leadership) because one will have a very definite affect upon the other.

I tell you honestly, I was only able to enter Christian leadership because my wife (whom I married before this decision) whole heartedly wanted to enter into it with me as a full partner. In fact (although I won't share the story with you), my wife was the first of the two of us to be given the knowledge from the Lord that this was coming! Neither of us had any idea what it would lead to but we (and especially, she) knew significant changes would happen. And while we've had our moments of wrestling and difference of opinion over what extent of time and

attention we devote to our ministry leadership (that by definition takes away from each other and from family), it has worked out because we both realized that our zealousness had to be bridled due a set of circumstances (an existing commitment to a large family) that came into existence BEFORE this new devotion to Christian leadership occurred.

David I'm sure never realized that being God's anointed leader meant that he would be expected to accept the just and punitive death of one of his own beloved children and then move on without excessive grieving. So while we can rightly see the wrong in his behavior and response towards Absalom's demise, we also ought to have some genuine sympathy and understanding for David. And we ought to always remember this true story whenever we begin to wonder if Christian leadership is for us.

### RE-READ 2<sup>ND</sup> SAMUEL 18:6 – end

Some subtle terminology in this passage tells us a lot about the Lord's mindset in this battle between David's and Absalom's forces. Verse 6 says, "So the people went out into the field against Israel." In Hebrew it says that the "**am**" went out to fight against Israel. As a general rule in the Bible the term "**am**" refers to God's people (His set-apart people). But isn't Israel also God's people? But here we have one set against the other. The essence of this sentence is that in this instance we have a battle of the "**am**" (God's TRUE people) against Israel (those who were supposed to be with God, but at the moment weren't). As we move along in this chapter and the next one we're going to see an amazing series of parallels as a precursor to Messiah's experience in His relationship with His people the Jews and with the rest of Israel. St. Paul, in a number of verses, explains that there is a part of Israel that is the TRUE Israel, while there is another part of Israel that has fallen away for the moment. The defining dividing line here in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 18 is those Israelites who stand on one side with God's anointed King David, versus those who stand on the opposite side of the line with the evil usurper Absalom. In the New Testament the dividing line between the "**am**" and "Israel" is that the "**am**" are those Israelites (and others) who stand with Yeshua, versus those Israelites (and others) who do not. In both cases (at the time of David and at the time after Christ) it is not that the "**am**" remains Israel and the other Hebrews are no longer Israel. Rather it is that there is a part of Israel that remains standing with God (the "**am**"), and another part that has fallen away. But physically they all remain Israel, and St. Paul doesn't question that. Thus the true difference between the "**am**" and Israel (in the context of this verse in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel and in St. Paul's writings) is a spiritual difference.

The battle for control of the throne of Israel takes place somewhere called the forest of Ephraim. There is enormous disagreement just where this place is. Many scholars say that this is located not far from Machanayim, in the Trans-Jordan, and the name is not indicative of the tribal territory it is in. Other scholars say that it is preposterous to say that the forest of Ephraim is in any place other than the tribal territory of Ephraim which is located on the west side of the Jordan River. Wherever it was the wooded area was treacherous and the very terrain itself caused more deaths of Absalom's soldiers than did being killed by David's men during the battle.

The scene is essentially of untrained, undisciplined, panic stricken troops who fell into pits, over cliffs, broke their legs by catching them between rocks and so on. Over 20,000 men of Israel (Absalom's men) died there that day.

Verse 9 begins the infamous story of Absalom's death. The chaotic nature of Absalom's folly continues when, as he's trying to escape back to Jerusalem, he rides under a tree in the forest of Ephraim and gets caught in it. His royal mule (not a donkey) rides off leaving him hanging there.

A lot has been made about the ironic nature of Absalom dying because he was hanging by his hair. Many fine sermons draw parallels to the Nazarites (who have long hair) and to other matters of pride all revolving around hair. Just one problem: not one word in this passage speaks of Avishalom's hair. It does not say that he was caught by his hair (his **se'ar**) despite all the English translations (including our CJB's) that say so. Rather it says he was caught by his **rosh**; he was caught by his head. Ancient Hebrew Sages made commentary that it must have been his hair that is being spoken of, and they assume this because of the pride he had in his hair that we read about early on in the stories of Absalom.

He may well have had a forked branch grasp his head, or perhaps stuck under his neck. We're not informed one way or the other. But I think the point of the story gets diverted when we make his long hair the issue (assuming he was even still wearing his hair long by this time). I think the better symbolism from this story is that riding a mule was reserved for royalty in that era. Since a mule was a mix of a donkey and a horse, it was considered against the Torah for Hebrews to breed such animals (it was an illicit mixture). Thus they had to purchase these terribly expensive animals from their neighbors. So here we have Absalom riding a royal mule, holding himself up as a king, and then suddenly a tree gobbles him up and leaves him hanging while his royal mount gallops off. He is royalty no more, and this is a divine sign that the Lord

has stripped him of his false claims and exposed him for any commoner who happens by to see that he is not, and has never been, a king over God's Kingdom.

A soldier happens to see Avishalom hanging helplessly in the tree and instead of doing what a warrior would do naturally (killing the man), he freezes. He knows who this is and he knows that King David made it exceptionally clear that no one was to harm Absalom. So he goes to his commander, Yo'av, and tells him what he's found. Yo'av is indignant; he wants to know why this soldier wouldn't of course do his duty and even take advantage of his good fortune. All the soldier would have had to do is kill Absalom, and then he would have collected a handsome reward and become a renowned man.

But the soldier says essentially, "no way!" The soldier stands up to his commander and blusters right back that he wouldn't kill Absalom even for a treasure chest full of silver because the king gave orders against it. Further, says the soldier, while Joab is at the moment dressing him down for NOT killing Absalom he equally has no doubt that if he DID kill Absalom and David reacted viciously over it, that Joab wouldn't lift a finger to intervene on his behalf.

Joab stormed off and took 3 darts and stuck them into Absalom's chest. The Hebrew word is **shevatim** and it means sticks, not darts or spears. The idea is that Yo'av wounded and fully incapacitated Avishalom, leaving him for others to finish off. Joab sent his armor bearers, his personal bodyguard, to go and kill Absalom. The number of armor bearers is listed as 10; a **minyan**. This is to impart the understanding that the killing of Absalom was divinely ordained as 10 is the number of completion or perfection. The armor bearers did no wrong in slaying Absalom; they were God's hand of justice.

Yo'av was a good general. The moment Absalom was dead he blew the shofar; this was a signal to his army to stop pursuing the fleeing Israelites and to return for an assembly. There was no point in any more killing. The cause for the killing was now dead. And after all this had been a battle of Hebrew upon Hebrew and there was no intent to eradicate the opposition to extinction. Further, Joab was a political man and knew full well that it was time to start the healing process and bring all the tribes together again under King David. So it would be duly noted by the Israelites that the moment David won, the killing stopped and hopefully there would be no further retribution. But that was yet to be seen so there was a great deal of apprehension among those who had sided with Absalom over what might come next.

Verse 17 explains that Absalom was denied a respectful burial. Rather he was

unceremoniously thrown into a pit and had rocks piled upon him. This sort of treatment is reserved for the worst of the worst.

Recall the evil **Akhan** (a Hebrew) as Joshua was fighting against the Canaanites and how **Akhan** stole some of God's holy property from Jericho and it caused Israel to be humiliated in battle.

### Jos 7:24-26 CJB

***<sup>24</sup> Y'hoshua, together with all Isra'el, took 'Akhan, the son of Zerach, with the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons, his daughters, his cattle, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent, and everything he had, and brought them up to the Akhor Valley.***

***<sup>25</sup> Y'hoshua said, "Why have you brought trouble on us? Today ADONAI will bring trouble on you!" Then all Isra'el stoned him to death; they burned them to ashes and stoned them.***

***<sup>26</sup> Over him they piled a great mound of stones, which is there to this day. Finally ADONAI turned away from his fierce anger. And this is why that place is called the Valley of Akhor [trouble] to this day.***

And in a later event we see another incidence of disrespectful treatment of a corpse as punishment for evil that greatly resembles what happened to Avishalom.

### Jos 8:28-29 CJB

***<sup>28</sup> So Y'hoshua burned down 'Ai and turned it into a tel forever, so that it remains a ruin to this day.***

***<sup>29</sup> The king of 'Ai he hanged on a tree until evening; at sundown Y'hoshua gave an order, so they took his carcass down from the tree, threw it at the entrance of the city gate and piled on it a big heap of stones, which is there to this day.***

Verse 18 gives the interesting piece of information that Absalom had raised up a monument to himself before he died, and that David obviously allowed it to remain standing. And the purpose for this monument is borne as much from superstition as narcissism. But there is a bit of a mystery surrounding all this; Absalom says he did this because he had no sons. And yet 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 14:27 says he had 3 sons. Some Rabbis say that his sons had all died before Absalom was killed. Josephus on the other hand says that is not so. He says that it is that Absalom's 3 sons were such a disappointment to him that he considered them as having no sons at all. None were suited to royalty in his eyes, none were worthy of succession to the throne, and none were even worthy of carrying on the family name. So Absalom's lament, "I have no sons", is an exaggeration. It is just a folk saying in which he has essentially disowned his sons so he thus sees himself as no longer having sons.

The superstition part of erecting this monument is that a person's spiritual essence only continues on in the afterlife for as long as the name is remembered and spoken out loud. Thus if his sons are disowned from the family, then their offspring is also not part of the family and so there is no one to "speak" Absalom's name. So by having his name inscribed on a public monument to himself, people will come to visit it and look upon it, speak his name (which was a traditional custom since all Middle Easterners subscribed to this superstition) and thus he was assured of an ongoing afterlife.

Many say that this monument is today one and the same as Absalom's Tomb in the Kidron Valley. That is very doubtful. Now the location of the monument as given in verse 18 is the King's Valley, and that is indeed very nearby the structure of Absalom's Tomb as we see it today. For centuries it was a tradition that passers-by would throw rocks at the monument to show their disdain for Absalom. They would also bring their children there, punish them, and show them the monument to remind them of what happens to rebellious sons using Absalom as the example.

But the reality is that the structure that presently exists was first built in the age of the Greeks, long after the time of Absalom. So, it's not clear whether this was or was not the exact location of the monument we read of here in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel.

In verse 19 the son of the High Priest Tzadok is so excited that the war is over and that King David is victorious that he wants to get to him quickly with the good news as he knows David is on pins and needles waiting to hear of the outcome. But as the next few passages unfold it seems evident that while Achima'atz knew the war was over, he didn't know that Absalom was dead. Or if he did, he didn't know how it happened. Yo'av insists that somebody else run to tell King David what happened because he knew that David was fully capable of killing the

messenger. And Absalom's status was far more important to David than the outcome of the battle.

**Achima'atz**, however, was a dedicated young man; he had been the one assigned to personally bring whatever intelligence had been gathered in Jerusalem about Absalom's plans to King David in Machanayim. He felt close to the King and knew that David trusted him; it was his job to inform David of important news regardless of what it might mean for him personally. But Joab wanted to use a man described in Hebrew as the **Cushi** (meaning Cushite), and sometimes translated into English as Ethiopian. The **Cushi** were the race of black skinned people, most of who at this time lived in Africa (primarily in the north). Some have tried to make this into a Biblical racial issue but there is no evidence of that. It is just a statement of fact. This Cushite was obviously someone Joab trusted; but remember that Achima'atz was not only close to David but also he was the High Priest's son. So Joab was more concerned to guard the safety of this person who came from an important family than to be concerned for the well being of a common trooper.

In the end Achima'atz was so determined that Joab allowed both he and the Cushite to go to David with the news. Achima'atz was apparently well known as a swift runner and even his style of running was recognizable. As he nears the city of Machanayim the guard on the watchtower sees him coming and calls down to David. David, trying to muster up all the hope he can, tells himself that if it's a single runner then it must be good news. Then the 2<sup>nd</sup> runner is spotted and David insists that since they are running separately that he too must have good news.

David, we are told, was sitting between the gates. Walled cities often had two sets of gates (an inner and an outer) as a double set of protection. It's hard not to see the parallel of David sitting on a chair at the gate with Eli (in Samuel's era) doing to same. But when Eli gets the devastating news about his sons he falls over backwards and dies. Well, David isn't going to die but he is about to get devastating news.

Achima'atz arrives first and approaches David. After going through the usual respectful protocol of greeting he blurts out that the enemy has been handed over to David (in other words, victory!) But David just sloughs that off and immediately asks about Absalom. Achima'atz kind of stammers and says that he knows Absalom was captured and that there was a big commotion all around him but he didn't know what it was all about.



David impatiently dismisses Achima'atz and starts to question the Cushite. The Cushite soldier naively assumes that Absalom's death will be as welcome news as confirmation of victory. Wrong.

Let's continue the story in Chapter 19. We'll only read part way through it today.

### **READ 2<sup>ND</sup> SAMUEL 19:1 - 15**

David is grief stricken; destroyed. And in his inconsolable state he completely forgets who he is in God, what his duties are as God's anointed King of Israel, and where his loyalties and priorities ought to lay. Over and over the only words that seem to be able to form in his mouth are, "My son Absalom, my son Absalom". He wishes he had died instead of his son. No doubt he was completely sincere in that wish.

You know, I think I can understand that. On more than one occasion I've looked at my wife, my children, my grandchildren and thought (perhaps selfishly) please, Lord, allow me to die before any of them. I don't think I could stand it if any of them perished while I was left to deal with it. And yet I know so many whose spouses have gone on before them, whose sons and daughters have died of disease or in defense of their country or in an accident, and who found the inner strength not only to go on living productively and with joy, but also to glorify the Lord in the midst of it all. Sadly the great King David didn't have that inner strength at this time and only wanted to die so that the pain would finally leave him in peace. He cared more about the demise of this evil son than he did for all of his other loyal sons and daughters (who were still alive), his wives, his soldiers who had risked their lives for him, and his fellow countrymen who needed his leadership more than ever at this critical moment.

Rashi makes a poignant remark about the opening word of this chapter; "Trembling" the king went up to the room over the gate. Rashi sees this trembling not as an intense state of mourning, but rather as an intense state of guilt. David knew at the bottom of his heart that even Absalom's rebellion was his fault. All of this horror and death upon his family and his

Kingdom was the outpouring of God's curse upon him for David's terrible sins (mostly revolving around Bathsheba). He felt personal responsibility and there was no shaking it. He was right. And it is a lesson that we must all prepare for if we are going to sin against the Lord; if we are going to ignore His Word and His commandments, then we should prepare for the worst. I cringe when I hear thoughtful Believers state that there is no consequence anymore for sinning; not earthly or heavenly. Nothing could be less Scriptural or accurate. Our sins indeed have been forgiven upon the stripes and blood of our Savior Yeshua, but only in the spiritual sphere. We will indeed bear the earthly consequences of our trespasses, as David did and would until his dying breath.

My prayer is that we will all recognize this, and therefore seek God's strength that we would avoid sinning in the first place. That begins with accepting His Messiah, and then immediately learning His ways in His Word. But if we should consider something else, then I pray that we recognize when God's punishment is upon us as did David, and not deflect responsibility as though our trespasses have no manifestation upon ourselves or others so long as we are righteous before God. I doubt that any of us will ever achieve such a lofty place in God's eyes as did King David; but that didn't stop the Lord from also laying a burdensome curse upon him for his awful trespasses.

We'll look at Joab's response to David's weeping and mourning next week.