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A Sad Victory II Samuel 18

Intro: We find ourselves in the middle of Absalom's rebellion against his father David, who just happens to be the rightful king of Israel, appointed & anointed by **Yahweh** to protect & lead His people & rule over His kingdom on earth. **Ch18** brings this rebellion to its logical conclusion by way of a great battle between Absalom & David's supporters. Of course, you wouldn't know it was a great battle by the way the writer presents it; he only uses 3 verses to describe it. In contrast, the majority of the text focuses our attention on Absalom's demise & David's response to it. Now, there are a few interesting characters scattered thru-out the narrative & we'll take a close look at a few of them but the 1 thing that stands out the most is the twists of irony that litter the story. The whole episode seems twisted because things happen that shouldn't & things that should happen don't. Good intentions are not met with right results. Nearly everything misses its mark. At the end of it all, what we have is a very sad victory.

1-5- At the end of **ch17**, David & Co. are on the run from Jerusalem, headed to the wilderness attempting to dodge Absalom's forces. David's inside man (Hushai) has bought him enough time to cross the Jordan enmasse & regroup in the city of Mahanaim. We don't know how many loyalist fled Jerusalem with David but by this time, there were thousands. David quickly numbers his troops & sets officers over them. He then divides his troops into 3rds & appoints Joab, Abishai & Ittai as commanders. David is resolved to go out to the battle with his army but the people refuse. They know he is Absalom's only focus & their only hope. If he were harmed, further resistance would be futile. David graciously acquiesces to their request & resigns himself to wait in the city to see how it all turns out.

But, before he sends off his troops, he delivers to his commanders 1 final order: **Deal gently...with Absalom.**" The order was specifically clear, public & memorable – but was it wise? I realize there's paternal concern here but look at the situation: on 1 hand, he's asking his loyal subjects to risk their lives for him & his throne; while on the other hand, he asks them not to kill his son, who is the sole cause of all the trouble they have recently endured & now face. Absalom certainly hadn't been gentle to his father but he had received nothing but mercy from David for all his sins.

6-8- Here, experience & wisdom prevails over youthful exuberance. Absalom thought he could just muster a large army & go take out all those old geezers. But David & his men were experienced combat fighters & they knew that they could minimize Absalom's superior numbers by fighting in the forest. It doesn't matter how many men you have, you can defeat the enemy if you can't see him. In fact, the terrain took out more of the enemy than the fighting did.

Consider the casualties of sin: 20K people lost their lives because of David's sin of adultery, Absalom's rebellion, Ahithophel's bitterness, Joab's anger. Immorality bears no good fruit; nor does rebellion, bitterness or anger.

9- Absalom didn't intend to find himself alone in front of David's men but fighting in the thick scrub of a forest causes all sorts of surprises to occur. It was an unplanned disaster that led to an unfortunate accident. As he makes his escape under a large oak tree, Absalom gets hung up by the branches. Now, whether his head/neck gets caught in a fork or his luxurious locks get tangled in the branches, we don't know; the text doesn't say. What we do know is Absalom hangs around but the mule keeps on going, probably glad to be rid of its wicked burden. **Rom 8:21-22** tells us that *the whole of creation groans under the burden of man's corruption* & that poor mule felt it worse than most.

hanging - Matthew Henry: **he hung between heaven & earth, as unworthy of either, as abandoned by both; earth would not keep him, heaven would not take him, hell therefore opens her mouth to receive him.** Note: both Absalom & Ahithophel died on trees. So what? Well, according to the Mosaic Law, hanging a body on a tree was evidence that the deceased was cursed by God (**Deut 21:22-23**). When you consider the crimes these 2 men committed, is it any wonder that they were cursed? Yet, David committed the same crimes & he was allowed to live. Why? Grace!

10-13- We're not told the name of this soldier but it was either **Sad Sack** or **Beatle Bailey**. He had the unfortunate task of telling Joab where Absalom was seen hanging around. Joab is incensed & lays into him: **Why didn't you kill him!** Even tho that would seem to be the most rational thing to do considering the circumstances, this guy wasn't about to take on that responsibility. Even he had heard what the king had ordered & if he had

killed Absalom himself & things went south – he knew Joab would kill him himself if David commanded it. No sir, that's above my pay grade!

14-16- Joab knew he was right so the only response he could muster was, “**I don't have time for this.**” Then, despite the king's direct order, Joab does a little target practice with 3 javelins. Then, Joab's “**make-sure-he's-dead**” crew took over. What are we to make of Joab's actions here? The author merely reports it; he offers no evaluation of it.

Oddly, Joab's act is both **rebellious** & **rational**. Rebellious in that he specifically defied the king's order but rational for the ultimate benefit of David's kingdom. Joab knew that to spare Absalom, as David ordered; would only prolong the rebellion & further weaken David's regime. Israel's current desperate situation needed a desperate remedy. Joab's political assessment was that David's kingdom will only be safe after the cancer of rebellion is radically removed. David would treat cancer with candy but Joab knew it required surgery & he nominated himself as the surgeon.

Once Absalom was dead, there was no need to continue the battle. Joab blows the trumpet & calls his forces back.

17-18- If Absalom's strange death pointed to his sin, just take a look at his burial plot: in the wilderness, in a pit, under a very large heap of stones! This is where you bury a criminal. In fact, Absalom's tomb resembles the burials of a long line of accursed men. **Achan** was buried under a **great heap of stones**; the **king of Ai** was hung on a tree then buried under a **great heap of stones**; the 5 king confederacy of **Joshua 10** met a strangely similar fate. Absalom doesn't just die a criminal (**murder/rebellion**); this is the rightful end of the 1 who would destroy **Yahweh's** chosen king. And yet, Absalom's death as a man under the curse is a preview; its typical of what will happen to all those who oppose God's kingdom, His chosen King or His people. Harsh, but believers have no hope unless it's true (**Ps 94**).

There's a bit of irony in **vs18**. Absalom had 3 sons but apparently lost them so, in lieu of actual descendents; he set up a monument for himself so he'd be remembered in Israel. Many men have made similar attempts but here's the thing: the only real monument we leave behind us is the memory of a godly life & godly offspring. Absalom tried to leave a lasting memorial but all we remember is that he murdered his brother, rebelled against his father,

died hanging from a tree & was buried in a pit in the wilderness. No, the only real monument we can have is to leave a testimony of a godly life. If all you leave your kids is something that a lawyer can settle – you haven't left them anything at all! But if there is the legacy of a godly parent & your testimony of walking with the Lord is reproduced in their life – **that's** a lasting monument. Absalom went to all the trouble of erecting that monument then ends up at the bottom of a very large pile of stones. Still a monument, just not the type he intended to have.

19-30- Ahimaaz resembles a pestering kid. He wants to carry the good news of victory to the king. Maybe he's too young or too excited to realize that the only news the king wants to hear is that Absalom is okay. Joab tho, knows just how volatile David can be when he hears news that someone close to him has died. Joab is being protective but Ahimaaz is being persistent, so Joab cuts him loose. We don't know the exact location of the battle or the route back to David but apparently the Cushite took the most direct route over rough terrain while Ahimaaz took the long way over smoother ground & the longest way was the quickest, who knew?

Ahimaaz arrived 1st & had the privilege of giving the king the good news of their victory. To his surprise, David wasn't interested in the out come of the battle; he only wanted to know what became of Absalom. David expected his forces to be victorious, that's why he ordered them to "**deal gently...Absalom.**" When push came to shove, Ahimaaz decided the better part of valor was to lie: "**I don't know...**" For all his speed, he had to step aside & wait for the slow post. Here's the thing: the truth is not always popular. People don't really want to hear that they're sinners, under the curse of God because of their sin. But, if you're not going to tell the whole truth – don't be a runner! There are ministers across America who think they serve their congregations by simply telling them what they want to hear. "**We don't want to offend anyone.**" But, the desire not to offend ends up condemning multitudes to eternal destruction. If all you try to do is make people feel good, then you're not ministering because the only way a sinner can truly feel good is through the knowledge that their sin has been forgiven by the blood of Jesus. You may as well treat cancer with cough syrup.

31-33- While there's no good way to say it, at least the Cushite had enough tact to just state what & not the how! But even that didn't soften the blow for David, who is inconsolable in his grief. But that's the focus of this section.

The writer has been building up to this point: he means for us to hear David's pitiful cries, he wants us to hear them. Why? Because there's more than just paternal affection here. If we go back to [12:10-12](#) it sheds light on David's sorrow. David's grief is inflamed by his guilt! David knew his own sin had set the sword loose on his family. David was guilty but his family suffered the consequences of his guilt. Guilt aggravates grief. We have a safe kingdom & a sad king.

Recently, I was asked, "How long do consequences last (for believers)?" Hard to say: some sins are personal ([heart/mind](#)) others are inter-personal ([public](#)). There's no limit to the damage sin can do or its duration. God can still work in, thru & around those consequences but He is in no way obligated to remove them. But actually, sinful actions are just symptoms of a deeper problem: rejecting God's word. God set the parameters for marriage but David chose to ignore them & this is what it caused. In the believer's life: every sin committed is in rebellion to clear directives or implied principles of the Word, whether we know it or not. That's the purpose of the Bible, to correct bad behavior ([II Tim 3:16](#)). We like the instruction & maybe even the doctrine but we aren't too keen on the reproof or correction but it's just as important & just as beneficial ([Ps 119:2-3, 9, 11](#)). The best way to limit the consequences of sin is to limit the control sin has in your life. The only effective way to do that is by [studying](#) & [adhering](#) to the Word ([II Tim 2:15](#))

David gave a command & it was ignored; Absalom was Israel's most dignified prince but he died in a most undignified way; he built a monument to commemorate his fame but the big pile of stones over his grave points to his infamy. News of the great victory only brings grief & mourning. This isn't the only place irony is found in the Bible. God created this world to be perfect & yet, it isn't. Why? Because man chose sin over a relationship with God & sin brought death & destruction to this world. We've made our own bed but God already had a plan. He knew man was incapable of saving himself so He sent His Son to the earth. God became man & walked among us; meeting & defeating every temptation to sin with the Word of God. Here's the greatest irony of all ([II Cor 5:21](#)). When Jesus died on the cross He took the sin of the world upon Himself & paid the just penalty of it. While He hung on that tree, He prayed, "**Father, forgive them (deal gently) for they do not know what they do.**" He didn't ask for this at the expense of justice but because He was about to bear the full punishment for sin that justice required. But just because Jesus died for the sin of the whole world

doesn't mean the whole world is automatically saved. You still must employ your God-given right to choose & ask Jesus to come into your life & save you from the penalty & the guilt of sin. 😊