

One Who Died Instead of You

Text: 2 Samuel 18

Introduction: Many of you, as parents, have experienced the pain of watching your child suffer, wishing there was something you could do to ease their suffering. Maybe your hands were tied. Maybe the situation was beyond your experience or expertise. Maybe you knew that by stepping in, you would simply make things worse. Whatever the situation, there was nothing you could do to take that suffering away.

In 2 Samuel 18, we see a father who experienced something like that. Absalom rebelled against his father David. And in rebelling against David, he rebelled against God. And we saw last week in chapter 17 that, as the consequence of Absalom's sin, "the Lord ordained...[to] bring harm upon Absalom."

David is in a tough spot. He loves Absalom. But he is unable to save Absalom from himself. And he is certainly unable to save Absalom from the justice of God.

This morning we're in 2 Samuel 18. Go ahead and turn there in your Bible if you haven't already. 2 Samuel 18. It begins on page 251 in the black pew Bible in front of you. If you don't own a Bible, we encourage you to take the pew Bible with you when you leave.

(Read 2 Samuel 18...Pray)

Ultimately, **David could not die in Absalom's place.** But we're going to see this morning that **David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus, did die in our place.**

The chapter begins with David preparing his men for battle, but it also begins with...

I. David's mercy – "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom" (2 Samuel 18:1-5).

A. The moment of truth has come, and David prepares for battle by dividing his men into thirds and placing them under the command of Joab, Abishai, and Ittai (vs. 1-2a).

- 1. We are familiar with all three of these men from our study of 1 and 2 Samuel so far. Joab was the commander of David's army all the way back in 1 Samuel before David was even king. Abishai and David also go way back. Abishai was Joab's brother, and he too was high up in David's army. Ittai, however, was a different story. We were first introduced to him in 2 Samuel 15. He was a Gittite, meaning he was a Philistine from Gath. But he showed himself exceedingly loyal to David when David was first fleeing from Jerusalem due to the threat of harm from Absalom. Rather than deserting David, Ittai went with him at great risk to himself.**
- 2. One commentator suggests that Ittai's division may have been made up largely of non-Israelites who had, like Ittai, become faithful servants of David (Woodhouse, 440). But that's just speculation. We do know that there was a large number of non-Israelites who followed David and were loyal to him.**

B. After preparing his men for battle, David says that he will go out with them (vs. 2b-4).

- 1. This is interesting because you may recall that there has been some controversy in 2 Samuel about David NOT going out into battle with his men. In 2 Samuel 11, we noted that the text says it was the "spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle" (11:1). But David did not go out with his men to battle. Instead, David was in Jerusalem wandering around on his roof when he spotted Bathsheba taking a bath.**
- 2. We also have 2 Samuel 21:17 which probably precedes chapter 18 chronologically where David's men said to him, "You shall no longer go out with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel."**

3. **Regardless of what may have happened in the past, on this occasion, David was prepared to go into battle with his men. He said, “I myself will also go out with you” (vs. 2b).**
 4. **But look at the response of David’s men in verse 3. (Read vs. 3)**
 5. **Their argument makes sense, doesn’t it? What does Absalom want? He wants David. More specifically, he wants David dead. If David goes out with his men, it will be much easier for Absalom to get what he wants. David could stay back in the city and manage things from there without exposing himself to the risk of battle. In telling David to stay back, his men were undoubtedly looking out not only for David but for themselves and the nation as well. From their perspective, what was best for them and for Israel was David on the throne as king.**
 6. **Upon hearing their argument, the text tells us that David relented and said, “Whatever seems best to you I will do” (vs. 4a).**
- C. But even as he is sending out his men to battle, we see David’s mercy in verse 5. (Read vs. 5)**
1. **That catches us a little off guard, doesn’t it? It’s unexpected. Absalom has driven his father into exile. He has taken the throne in Jerusalem. And now he’s trying to kill David. But David wants his men to deal gently with Absalom. Wow!**
 2. **Now, I want to acknowledge that not all commentators see David’s request to “deal gently...with Absalom” the same way. Warren Wiersbe says, “If David had one fault, it was pampering his sons” (Wiersbe, 138). I don’t think that was David’s only fault, but we’ve noted in our study of 2 Samuel that it was certainly one of them.**
 3. **Absalom was not a good dude. He certainly had not been gentle with his father. He murdered his brother Amnon. He drove David out of Jerusalem, seized his throne, violated his concubines, and now he is out to kill David. So, David’s request to “deal gently...with Absalom” does strike us as strange at best.**
 4. **But I do think the text intends for us to see David’s mercy in this request. Because it’s not unlike David’s reaction to Saul when he was trying to kill David. On at least two occasions, David had the opportunity to take Saul out, and on both occasions, he refused. He was merciful to Saul. When Ish-bosheth seized his father Saul’s throne and initially prevented David from reigning over all Israel, David did not seek Ish-bosheth’s life. In fact, he was quite upset when Rechab and Baanah murdered him. And even with Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth, David was merciful and kind to him.**
 5. **David’s murder of Uriah was a huge blight on David’s life. But I think that what we actually see in 1 and 2 Samuel is that it was out of character for David. David was a mighty warrior. The women sang, “Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1 Sam. 18:7). But he was not bloodthirsty. He was not vengeful. He did not delight in death.**
 6. **I think there’s something for us to learn from David in that. It is good and right for us to desire and seek justice in the world. But we must never allow ourselves to become vengeful or bloodthirsty. This has implications for how we think about war. It’s possible to think that a war is necessary for the good of the nation and the world without allowing your heart to delight in war or the death of our enemies. This has implications for how we think about people who commit heinous crimes. If you read the social media comments under a post about a heinous crime, you’ll see jokes made about all kinds of acts of vigilante justice. As Christians, we can’t allow our hearts to go there. It’s possible to desire just punishment for a crime without delighting in the suffering of another image bearer of God. And this certainly has implications for our personal lives and how we interact with those who wrong us in some way. We can desire and seek justice without being vengeful or bloodthirsty.**

7. I think about the Lord Jesus who said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7). He also instructs us, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matt. 5:44-45).
8. I think also about the words of Jesus on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34).
9. David’s mercy here is important because of the way it points us to Jesus. But more about that later in the sermon.

We’ve seen David’s mercy. Now let’s turn our attention to...

II. Absalom’s death – “[They] surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him” (2 Samuel 18:6-18).

A. What we have here is a condensed retelling of the battle that took place between the army of David and the army of Absalom.

1. It’s possible that there were more battles than just one. But the one that is recorded here beginning in verse 6 was the decisive battle.
2. It’s interesting that Absalom’s army is referred to as Israel. David is still Israel’s king, but for all intents and purposes, Absalom is acting as Israel’s king. The only thing standing between him and actually being Israel’s king is David. And more importantly, the Lord.
3. The text says that the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim (vs. 6). And Absalom’s army was defeated by David’s army. The loss was so great that twenty thousand men died that day (vs. 7).
4. Verse 8 says... (Read vs. 8)
5. Apparently, there were more fatalities due to the treacherous conditions and terrain than there were due to actual combat. That’s hard for us to wrap our minds around. The picture the author paints for us is one of devastating defeat for Absalom’s army.

B. But it was not just Absalom’s army that experienced a devastating defeat. It was Absalom himself as well.

1. Look at verse 9. Notice that the text says, “Absalom HAPPENED to meet the servants of David.” The author of 2 Samuel intentionally makes it sound like it was mere chance that caused Absalom to meet the servants of David. That’s how something like this would appear to most people. There they are in an expansive forest with thousands of people at war with one another. And David’s servants just HAPPEN to run into Absalom. No. They didn’t just HAPPEN to meet. God brought them together by His sovereign control because He, as we saw in chapter 17, intended to “bring harm upon Absalom.” Nothing in this world just HAPPENS. God is sovereign over everything.
2. Absalom was riding on his mule, and his mule went under the thick branches of a big tree. And somehow, Absalom’s head got caught in the tree. Maybe by his long hair which we learned about back in chapter 14. We don’t know. The text doesn’t say specifically how it happened. But the result was that Absalom was left suspended in the tree.
3. Phillips writes, “Suspended between heaven and earth, Absalom is depicted as being on the brink of judgment. Absalom hangs as an accursed one, a point made clear by the writer’s careful use of a verb for *hanging* that is used elsewhere in the Old Testament only in Deuteronomy 21:23: “a hanged man is cursed by God” (Phillips, 322).
4. Robert Bergen writes, “Absalom had rebelled against divine law by rebelling against his father and sleeping with members of David’s harem. Absalom had the massive armies of Israel fighting to protect him, and he was personally equipped with a fast means of escape not afforded other soldiers—a mule. Nevertheless, in spite of these seemingly insurmountable advantages, Absalom could not escape God’s judgment...The fearful judgment of the Torah had proven credible: the Lord had upheld his law” (Bergen, 421).

5. Someone from among Joab's men saw him there and apparently knew that it was Absalom. He said to Joab, "Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak" (vs. 10).
 6. Look at Joab's response in verse 11. (Read vs. 11)
 7. Uh oh! Joab asks the man why he didn't do the very thing that David specifically ordered them not to do. David said to deal gently with Absalom. But Joab had no intention of dealing gently with Absalom.
 8. See, where David was not vengeful or bloodthirsty, Joab didn't have the same hesitancy. Joab was more than willing to shed blood. In fact, it appears that he had offered 10 pieces of silver and a belt to anyone who would kill Absalom.
 9. We then see that the man showed more integrity and loyalty to David than Joab who was very close to David as the commander of his army. Look at verse 12. (Read vs. 12) David said to deal gently with Absalom, and that's exactly what the man did.
 10. The man figured that if he was responsible for killing David's son, the king would eventually find out, and Joab would do nothing to defend him (vs. 13). And based on what we know of Joab, the man was probably right.
 11. That didn't deter Joab. It didn't matter to him what David said. He thought he knew best, and he took matters into his own hands. (Read vs. 14-15)
 12. That was what the whole war was about. Who would be Israel's king? David or Absalom? Now that Absalom was dead, the war was effectively over.
 13. So, Joab blew his trumpet. His troops returned from their pursuit.
 14. And they buried Absalom. Look at verse 17. (Read vs. 17)
 - a. This was a burial fit for a traitor. The pile of stones stood as a reminder of what happens to those who set themselves against the Lord and His purposes (Woodhouse, 445).
 - b. Phillips writes, "However cruel Joab's treatment of Absalom's body may have been, it was entirely appropriate under the requirements of God's law. This is, in fact, precisely what God had ordained for a son who rebelled against his father's rule and flouted God's reign" (Phillips, 324).
15. While still living, Absalom had erected a monument to himself in the King's Valley. But now, Absalom's death is a reminder to us that you cannot oppose the Lord without experiencing the consequences of your rebellion.
 - a. Yes, Absalom rebelled against his father, and there's a lesson to be learned in that too. For God says, "Honor your father and mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12).
 - b. But even more significant than Absalom's rebellion against David was his rebellion against God. Not only did Absalom make himself an enemy of David, he also made himself an enemy of God. And as a result, the Lord in His righteousness and justice "ordained to...bring harm upon Absalom."
 - c. The Bible teaches us that because of our sin, apart from Christ, we are already enemies of God. Like Absalom, we too have rebelled against God. And as a result, we deserve God's punishment. The wages of sin is death. But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We've seen David's mercy and Absalom's death. That leads, finally, to...

III. David's grief – "Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son my son!" (2 Samuel 18:19-33).

- A. At this point in the narrative, Absalom is dead, but David doesn't yet know.

1. Ahimaaz wants to go and report to David from the field of battle the news that “the LORD has delivered him from the hand of his enemies” (vs. 19)
 - a. That IS what has happened, isn’t it? The Lord HAS delivered David from the hand of his enemies. Just like He did with Goliath. Just like He did with Saul. Just like he did with Ish-bosheth. And now He has done it with Absalom.
 - b. David prayed for this. Remember Psalm 3? “Arise, O LORD! Save me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to the LORD; your blessing be on your people!”
 - c. Ahimaaz seems to assume that David will be thrilled to hear of the Lord’s deliverance, and he wants to be the one to break the news.
2. But Joab knows better. He says to Ahimaaz... (Read vs. 20)
 - a. Joab knows that the news Ahimaaz understands as “the LORD has delivered him from the hand of his enemies” would be received by David as “the king’s son is dead.”
 - b. And Joab knows how David has responded previously to news of the death of others in Israel. Remember what happened when David heard of Saul’s death back in chapter 1? David executed the man who claimed to have killed Saul. And what about Ish-bosheth? Rechab and Baanah were proud of themselves for killing Ish-bosheth, and they thought David would be proud of them too. But instead, David had them executed.
3. So, instead of sending Ahimaaz to carry the news, Joab sent a Cushite. He said, “Go, tell the king what you have seen” (vs. 21).
4. Still, Ahimaaz insisted that he go and carry the news as well, so he did.

5. Look at verse 24. (Read vs. 24-27)
6. When Ahimaaz arrived, he declared, “All is well” (vs. 28a). He bowed before David and said, “Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king” (vs. 28b).
7. Expectedly, David wanted to hear about Absalom, to which Ahimaaz claimed ignorance. It’s possible, I guess, that Ahimaaz really didn’t know about Absalom, but that seems unlikely. It seems more likely that he took Joab’s warning to heart and waited for the Cushite to report the news concerning Absalom.
8. Either way, when the Cushite arrived, he was prepared to provide David with the news concerning Absalom. Look at verse 31. (Read vs. 31-32)

B. David’s response to the Cushite’s report was one of deep grief.

1. Look at verse 33. (Read vs. 33)
2. Surely David is filled with grief because his son is dead. But it seems that more is going on here. David undoubtedly feels responsible. There’s a very real sense in which Absalom is dead because of David’s sin. David’s sin wreaked havoc in his family. As a result, Amnon is dead. And now Absalom.
3. God said, “The sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife” (12:10).
4. And now, David’s house has again experienced the truthfulness of those words.

Conclusion: We’ve seen David’s mercy. We’ve witnessed Absalom’s death. And now we’ve observed David’s grief.

As we draw to a close this morning, I want to direct your attention to David’s words at the very end of chapter 18.

David cries, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

That just begs for a Christ-centered end to the sermon, doesn't it? I don't know how you can read that and not go from 2 Samuel 18 straight to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

See, we are more like Absalom than we would like to think. Like Absalom, we have rebelled against God our Father. We've done the things God has told us not to do. We've failed to do the things God has told us to do. We have even tried to steal His kingdom for ourselves. Like Absalom, we've made a mockery of our Father by our sin and rebellion. And because of our sin and rebellion, we deserve the same fate as Absalom. We deserve to die. The wages of sin is death.

But what David could only wish to do for Absalom, Jesus has done for us when He went to the cross and died in our place to pay for our sin. He took the penalty we deserved for our sin on Himself. He died in our place. As our substitute.

Absalom died hanging in a tree with a spear thrust through his body. He died because of HIS sin and rebellion. Jesus also died on a tree with a spear thrust through his body. But He died for OUR sin and rebellion.

There's always a danger when we come to the Bible that we would read it in a merely moralistic way. And there's certainly a lot to learn from David and Absalom concerning what to do and maybe more so what not to do. But the message of the gospel is about what we cannot do. That is, save ourselves.

We can't be good enough. We can't trust God enough. We can't submit to His rule and reign in our lives enough. We can't flee from temptation and sin enough. We can't be intentional enough in raising our children. We can't honor our father and mother enough. On our own, we are not enough.

But Jesus is enough. Turn from your sin. Put your faith in Jesus Christ. And He will save you. He will make you right with God. And He will equip you with His Spirit to enable you to live a life pleasing to God your Father.