

## **A Study of II Samuel**

### *The Life of David*

#### **Chapter Sixteen**

#### **A House of Trouble**

**Tidings Regarding Mephibosheth (1-4):** David was a little past the top of the hill when Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth met David who, out of gratitude to David for his past kindness toward him now provided the fugitive king asses and provisions for his journey.

However, Ziba also brought David the sad report that Mephibosheth had turned against the king, hoping that during the turmoil caused by the revolution he might be able to retrieve Saul's throne (16:3).

There was an air of plausibility in Ziba's story: Many on whom the king had conferred favors were now deserting him. No wonder, therefore, that in the excitement of momentary feeling, believing, on the report of a slanderer, Mephibosheth to be among the number, David pronounced a rash and unrighteous judgment by which a great injury was inflicted on the character and interests of a devoted friend. But as we will learn this was a self-serving deceit.

Ziba gained David's favor at the cost of Mephibosheth, whom he misrepresented as staying at Jerusalem in expectation of regaining the kingdom.

Mephibosheth had everything to lose and nothing to gain from Absalom's success. A cripple and a Benjamite could never dream of being preferred by Judah to the handsome Absalom; interest and gratitude bound him to David.

David's response to Ziba concerning Mephibosheth is "you can keep all that is given Mephibosheth (4). David stripped from Mephibosheth the generous pension he had given and bequeathed it all to Ziba (9:7).

**The Cursing of Shimei (5-14):** David encounters Shimei, a relative of Saul, who greeted the fleeing monarch and his officials at Behurim (east of the Mount of Olives) with curses and physical abuse, pelting them with stones. The misfortune of his family, and the occupation by David of what they considered their rightful possession, afforded a natural, if not justifiable cause for this barrage of rude insults and violence. He upbraided David as an ambitious usurper and charged him as one whose misdeeds had recoiled upon his own head, to surrender a throne to which he was not entitled.

He taunted David with the observation that since he was a man of blood God was now avenging the death of Saul and his family by driving David from power. This was untrue, of course, for David had not raised his hand against Saul, whom he regarded as the anointed of the Lord, but had taken every measure to deal graciously with Saul's survivors. Shimei's real complaint, as is evident from his own admission, was that David sat on the throne of Saul. (5-8)

Cursing the king was a capital crime. Abishai, David's bodyguard and nephew, begged the king to let him decapitate Shimei. (9).

David however would not let Abishai kill Shimei but rather looked at it as Shimei's cursing of David was of God. So Shimei continued his cursing, stone-throwing, and dirt-tossing as David continued on the road to his destination. (12-14).

**Hushai is Received by Absalom (15-19):** Absalom arriving at Jerusalem was immediately met by Hushai, a friend of David who was pretending to be loyal to Absalom. His hidden purpose was to be the contradictor to the counsel of Ahithophel, Absalom's chief adviser.

The feigned expression by Hushai was "God save the king" which is to say, "May the king live for a long time".

**The Counsel of Ahithophel (20-23):** Ahithophel advised Absalom to assume the right to the throne through a public seizure of the royal harem. This was the custom

employed in ancient times to demonstrate possession of the throne. It was not actually viewed with abhorrence by the Israelites, whose feelings on such matters were blunted by the practice of polygamy. Following this counsel would cause an irreparable breach between father and son. Ahithophel's advice was colored by his own agenda toward David.

When Absalom asked Ahithophel what he should do, his adviser told him to lie with his father's concubines, an evidence of his succession (cf. 3:6-7), advice which Absalom quickly followed. The words of counsel which Ahithophel gave were given credence as though they came directly from God, so highly regarded was his wisdom. Hushai's assignment would be difficult indeed.

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**The Counsel of Ahithophel (1-3):** The second bit of advice which Ahithophel gave Absalom was that he, Ahithophel, should pursue David in order to kill him and return everyone else. With their king dead his followers would certainly surrender and return to Jerusalem peacefully. Apparently Ahithophel's plan was to quickly surround the forces of David and create such a panic that all would flee, making it possible to slay only David. This would make it easier to win over the remnant of David's cohorts.

**The Counsel of Hushai (4-13):** And the saying pleased Absalom well, and all the elders of Israel. He thought the advice of Ahithophel was excellent. If David had been attacked that very night, he would have been but twelve or fifteen miles from the capital, without food and ammunition, and with his forces in a serious state of disorganization. The rebellion of Absalom would have secured its objective and David would have met with certain defeat (1-3).

Eager for a second opinion, Absalom called for Hushai and asked him if Ahithophel's counsel was wise (4).

Hushai told Absalom that David and his men, far from being exhausted, would be more courageous and fearsome than ever. Hushai's argument was that David's men would fight like a cornered bear: like a wild bear whose cubs have been stolen, the king, Hushai said, would be enraged over the loss of his kingdom. To move against him now would be foolish. The Syrian bear is said to be particularly ferocious (6-8).

Initial casualties, which were certain to occur, would cause Absalom's men to despair of victory and thus his cause would be defeated. It would be far better, Hushai continued, for Absalom to wait until he could amass a huge army and then attack (11-13).

Absalom decided to follow Hushai's instruction and reject that of Ahithophel. Obviously, this was the Lord's doing, to frustrate Ahithophel's advice and bring disaster on Absalom (14).

**The Plans of Absalom made Known to David (15-22):** Hushai immediately communicated Ahithophel's advice and his own to Zadok and Abiathar, who then sent their sons Jonathan and Ahimaaz from En Rogel (south of Jerusalem) to David with the message that he must hasten his flight (15-16).

"A wench": literally, a maidservant (17). She could go to the fountain for water without exciting suspicion, since the drawing of water was carried on mainly by women.

But the young men were spotted, and their errand was reported to Absalom. Thanks to the boldness and kindness of a woman in the village of Bahurim east of the Mount of Olives (cf. 16:5), they escaped detection by hiding in a dry well (18-21).

Then they made their way to David, who by now was at the Jordan (22).

**The Suicide of Ahithophel (23):** Back at Jerusalem, Ahithophel, crushed because his counsel to Absalom had been spurned, committed suicide in his hometown by hanging himself. Ahithophel had worked himself into a difficult predicament. If Absalom had been victorious, Ahithophel would have had to give way to Hushai; if David had been victorious, Ahithophel would have been called to account for his advice concerning the proposed capture of David. The people knew his precarious position and understood the thinking of a hopelessly defeated man (23).

It may be noted that the suicide of Ahithophel did not exclude him from regular burial in the family sepulcher. The care with which Ahithophel prepared himself and his family and the burial in the family plot suggest that this suicide was not frowned upon. The number of suicides in the Bible is extremely few.

**David In Favor with the People (24-29):** Probably David chose to go to Mahanaim because it was fortified and also had served as the capital of Israel under Ish-Bosheth (2:8). There could well have been a residue of good feeling there toward David because of David's past favors to Saul's family, especially to Mephibosheth (9: I 0-13).

*Shobi-musthave* been a brother of Hanun. Disapproving, probably, of that young king's outrage upon the Israelite ambassadors, he had been made governor of Ammon by David on the conquest of that country.

*Machir-Son of Ammie!*, dwelling in Lo-debar(2 Sam 9:4,5), a wealthy landowner who protected Mephibosheth, until assured of the friendly intentions of David (compare Josephus *Antiquities*, VII, ix, 8). He may have been a brother of Bathsheba as an Ammie! was the father of Bathsheba. (In the parallel passage, 2 Sam 11:3, by transposition of the two parts of the name, he is called Eliam, meaning "my God is a kinsman.")

*Barzillai-* A Gileadite of Rogelim, (25 miles north of Mahanaim) conducted David over Jordan but being an old man of 80 years of age, he declined David's invitation to come to live in the capital and sent instead his son Chimham (2 Sam 19:31-39). David before his death charged Solomon to "show kindness unto the sons of Barzillai." (1 Kgs 2:7).

These three men were chieftain's tributary to David, bound to him by ties of loyalty and obligation. Besides, they may have preferred to cast their lot with David, a known quantity, as opposed to Absalom, an unknown.

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**Preparing for War (1-5):** The hardy mountaineers of Gilead came in great numbers at the call of their chieftains, so that, although without money to pay any troops, David soon found himself at the head of a considerable army. A pitched battle was now inevitable.

David, now in security and with his supplies replenished, quickly took measures to reorganize his troops and prepare them for the inevitable encounter with Absalom. This means not merely that he counted his forces but that he mustered and reviewed them.

"And set captains": This was the usual military arrangement, and it corresponds to the civil arrangement suggested by Moses in Ex 18:25. (vs. 1).

A third of his troops he assigned to Joab; a third to Abishai, Joab's brother; and a third to Ittai. It is interesting that David gave one third of the army to Ittai, a man of Gath, who had proved loyal to the cause of the king in the exile.

David determined that he would lead the attack personally, but his comrades dissuaded him (2).

He was worth 10,000 of them, they said. If half of them died all would go on. But if he died the whole cause would be lost (3).

Reluctantly David agreed to remain behind but commanded his officers that they not harm Absalom in the battle. Apparently, David still looked upon Absalom as but a boy. He treated the rebellion as a youthful escapade which he could forgive rather easily. However, Joab and the army regarded the insurrection as heaving serious threats.

**A Time for War (6-8):** The encounter soon followed in the forest of Ephraim, a deserted place in the vicinity of Mahanaim (cf. 17:24, 27).

As terrible as Absalom's losses were by the swords of David's heroes (18:7), they were even greater from the elements of that inhospitable terrain.

"The wood devoured": a great multitude perished in the pits and precipices. The thick forest of oaks, by obstructing the flight, greatly aided the victors in the pursuit.

**The Death of Absalom (9-18):** Absalom himself, in a frantic attempt to escape on his mule, rode beneath a large oak tree and became tangled in its branches. He was suspended in midair. To ride upon a mule was a mark of royalty (I Kgs. I :33,38). This mule may have belonged to David (9).

"His head": The tradition that Absalom was caught by his hair comes from Josephus.

A soldier of David found him in this predicament but because David had ordered his men not to hurt Absalom, the soldier refused to harm him further (10-13).

Joab was not so reluctant, however, and thrust Absalom in the heart with three darts (14). The deed, partially done by Joab, was completed by his bodyguard. Being a violation of the expressed wish, as well as of all the fond paternal feelings of David, it must have been deeply offensive to the king, nor was it ever forgotten (I Kgs 2:5); and yet there is the strongest reason for believing that Joab, in doing it, was actuated by a sincere regard to the interests of David, both as a man and a monarch.

Immediately 10 of his attendants struck Absalom to make sure he died (15).

Knowing that by the death of the usurper there was no occasion for further bloodshed, he put an end to the pursuit and thereby evinced the temperate policy of his conduct.

However harsh and unfeeling to the king Joab may appear, there can be no doubt that he acted the part of a wise statesman in regarding the peace and welfare of the kingdom more than his master's private inclinations, which were opposed to strict justice as well as his own interests.

Absalom deserved to die by the divine law (De 21:18, 21), as well as being an enemy to his king and country; and no time was more fitting than when he met that death in open battle.

"A great pit" (17), This may have been a cave or an unused cistern. Some think the heaping of stones on Absalom 's grave was symbolic of the stoning which was the legal penalty due a rebel son (Deut. 21:20, 21). It is still a custom in the East for passers-by to cast stones on the grave of a criminal.

Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and reared up for himself a pillar, which *is* in the king's dale: for he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance: and he called the pillar after his own name: and it is called unto this day, Absalom' s place (18).

**David Receiving the News of Absalom (19-33):** When Ahimaaz, David's courier (cf. 15:36; 17:17), announced that he would set out to bear word to David of the army's victory Joab forbade him to do so, ostensibly to spare the king unnecessarily early grief over his son's death. Joab may also have been concerned for the well-being of the young messenger for the bearer of such bad news might not be well received (19-20).

Joab dispatched an unnamed Cushite (an Ethiopian) who was obviously known to David. He was either considered more knowledgeable as to what had happened to Absalom (see 18:29) or was more expendable (21).

Ahimaaz was not to be denied, however, and finally received permission to go. Taking a shortcut, he outran the Cushite. The route taken by Cushite was the shorter route, but it led over hill and dale. The route taken by Ahimaaz lay along the bed of the Jordan River valley and could be traversed more quickly (22-23).

Both runners were seen from a distance, and when David understood that the nearer was Ahimaaz he assumed that the message he was conveying was good because Ahimaaz himself was good (24-28).

The assumption was unfounded, however, for when Ahimaaz finally was able to deliver his message all he could do was speak in general terms of the victory over Absalom.

The details were left to the Cushite who presently arrived and shared with the king the grisly news that Absalom and his confederates were dead (29-32).

Overwhelmed, the king retired to an upper room where he privately poured out his heart before God in unremitting grief. The depths of his love for his rebel son are seen in his lament, "If only I had died instead of you". Two of David's sons, Amnon (13:28-29) and Absalom (18:15), died violent deaths because of David's sin (12:10)