

When Wisdom Competes

2 Samuel 17

“The Lord had decreed that Ahithophel’s good advice be undermined in order to bring about the ruin of Absalom,” 2 Samuel 17:14

Class Overview: Second Samuel 17 records one of the most strategic moments in Absalom’s rebellion. Two counselors give competing advice about how to pursue David. Ahithophel recommends a swift, decisive attack while David is weak and vulnerable. Hushai, secretly loyal to David, counters with a different plan that appeals to Absalom’s pride and fear. Absalom accepts Hushai’s advice, unknowingly giving David the time he needs to regroup.

Behind the scenes, God is working. The chapter clearly shows that the Lord chose to foil the good advice of Ahithophel to bring disaster on Absalom. What appears to be a political decision is actually divine providence. God quietly protects David and guides the course of events. Here we also see the tragic end of Ahithophel. When his advice is rejected, he realizes that the rebellion will fail and takes his own life. Meanwhile, David receives help from loyal supporters who provide supplies and refuge as he prepares for what’s ahead. Second Samuel 17 reminds us that human plans never operate outside God’s purposes. Even when circumstances seem uncertain, the Lord continues to guide events according to His will.

Class Objectives:

By the end of this class, you should be able to:

1. Describe the competing strategies offered by Ahithophel and Hushai.
 2. Understand how God used Hushai’s counsel to protect David.
 3. Recognize the role of pride and insecurity in Absalom’s decision.
 4. Identify the tragic outcome of Ahithophel’s rejected counsel.
 5. Apply lessons about trusting God’s sovereignty when events seem uncertain.
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Introduction:

This chapter covers the height of Absalom’s rebellion. David has fled Jerusalem and is regrouping across the Jordan River. Absalom controls the capital and believes victory is within reach. Everything appears to favor the rebellion. But the outcome of this conflict will not be decided by military strength alone. It will hinge on counsel — on which voice Absalom chooses to follow.

Ahithophel proposes a plan that could quickly defeat David. He suggests an immediate nighttime attack while David’s forces are tired and scattered. It’s excellent military advice. But Hushai, David’s friend inside Absalom’s court, offers a different strategy. He appeals to Absalom’s pride and fear, urging him to gather all Israel before launching an attack. The plan sounds impressive but delays action.

What Absalom does not realize is that God is already at work. The Lord will use Hushai's counsel to frustrate Ahithophel's plan and protect David. This chapter teaches that while people plan and strategize, God ultimately determines the outcome. Human wisdom may appear powerful, but the purposes of God cannot be overturned.

Ahithophel's Strategy for Immediate Victory (17:1-4)

As the rebellion gains momentum, Ahithophel presents a plan that could have ended the conflict quickly. His strategy is simple and direct. He asks Absalom for permission to take twelve thousand men and pursue David immediately. The attack would happen at night, when David and his followers are tired, discouraged, and scattered. Ahithophel's plan is militarily brilliant. He understands David's situation. The king is on the run, his supporters are exhausted, and his forces are not yet organized. A sudden strike would likely cause panic and collapse. Ahithophel even explains that the goal is not to destroy the entire group but to target David alone. If the king falls, the resistance will dissolve, and the people will return peacefully.

From a strategic perspective, the advice makes sense. It is swift, decisive, and efficient. The text even notes that the proposal seemed right to Absalom and the elders of Israel. Humanly speaking, this plan could have secured the rebellion. But something deeper is happening. God is already working behind the scenes to protect David. What appears to be the strongest plan will soon be overturned.

Think about how persuasive human wisdom can be. A plan might seem perfect from a strategic view, but still fail if it opposes God's purposes. Absalom believes he has the upper hand, but the outcome won't be decided by clever strategy alone. Ahithophel's advice sets the stage for the key decision ahead—whether Absalom will act quickly or delay. That choice will shape the direction of the entire rebellion.

Hushai's Counter-Counsel an Appeal to Absalom's Pride (17:5-14)

After hearing Ahithophel's plan, Absalom asks for a second opinion. He calls for Hushai, not realizing that Hushai has returned to Jerusalem to secretly serve David. This moment is the turning point of the chapter. He begins carefully. He first acknowledges Ahithophel's reputation for wisdom, but then he says, "This time the advice is not good." That statement opens the door for a completely different strategy.

Hushai reminds Absalom that David is not an ordinary opponent. David is a seasoned warrior, and the men with him are experienced fighters. Hushai warns that David is likely hiding in a strong position and waiting for an opportunity to strike. If Absalom sends a small force and the attack fails, panic will spread and the rebellion could collapse. Then Hushai appeals to Absalom's pride. Instead of sending twelve thousand men, he suggests gathering all Israel from one end of the land to the other. Absalom himself should lead the army into battle. The image is grand and impressive — a massive force moving together like "sand on the seashore."

The plan sounds bold and glorious, but it carries a hidden cost: time. Gathering the entire nation would take days or even weeks. That delay would give David the opportunity to regroup and organize his forces. Absalom listens and decides that Hushai's advice is better than Ahithophel's. From a human

perspective, it seems like a strategic choice. But the narrator tells us what is really happening behind the scenes:

“The Lord had decreed that Ahithophel’s good advice be undermined in order to bring about the ruin of Absalom.”

What may seem like a political decision is actually divine intervention. God is quietly protecting David and guiding events to fulfill His purpose. Even with wise advice available, pride can cloud judgment. Absalom opts for the plan that makes him look powerful instead of the most effective one. Through that choice, God begins to turn the tide of the rebellion.

Hushai’s Message and God’s Protection of David (17:15-22)

As soon as Absalom accepts his advice, Hushai moves quickly. He sends word to the priests Zadok and Abiathar, explaining both Ahithophel’s plan and the strategy he has just proposed. Hushai urges them to warn David immediately. The message is urgent: David must not stay near the wilderness crossings but should move quickly across the Jordan to avoid being caught.

The priests deliver the message through their sons, Jonathan and Ahimaaz, who wait outside the city to avoid suspicion. However, the message is nearly discovered. A young man notices them and reports to Absalom. The two messengers are forced to hide in a well in a house’s courtyard in Bahurim. The woman of the house covers the well’s opening with a cloth and spreads grain over it so no one will suspect anything. When Absalom’s men arrive and search for them, the woman calmly tells them the men have already crossed the water. The search party departs, and the messengers climb out of the well to continue their mission. They reach David and warn him to move quickly. David and everyone with him crossed the Jordan during the night. By morning, everyone is safely on the other side.

God was carefully protecting David. The warning arrives just in time. The messengers avoid discovery. A woman’s quick thinking keeps them safe from danger. Every small detail plays a part in David’s survival. What seems like ordinary events is actually God’s providence in action. God is directing conversations, movements, and decisions to ensure His chosen king’s safety. Even the tiniest actions — a hidden well, a cloth spread over grain, a timely warning — become tools of protection. God’s care often operates quietly through everyday circumstances. While armies gather and rebellion grows, God is already working to secure David’s safety and prepare the next stage of the story.

Ahithophel’s Despair and the Gathering of David’s Support (17:23-29)

When Ahithophel realizes that his counsel has been rejected, he immediately understands what it means. He knows the delay will give David time to recover and organize his forces. The rebellion that once seemed unstoppable will now face resistance. Ahithophel returns home, arranges his affairs, and takes his own life. It is a tragic ending for a man once known for extraordinary wisdom. His counsel was respected as if it were the word of God, yet his wisdom had been used in service of rebellion. When the plan collapses, so does his hope.

Meanwhile, David continues moving eastward and eventually reaches Mahanaim, a fortified city across the Jordan. There, he begins to regroup. Loyal supporters arrive with supplies and provisions — beds, food, grain, and other necessities for David and the people with him. Leaders such as Shobi, Machir, and Barzillai step forward to help.

These acts of generosity are important. David may have lost the capital, but he has not lost the loyalty of everyone. God provides support through faithful people who step in at the right moment. Can you see the two contrasting outcomes in this chapter? Ahithophel, whose wisdom served rebellion, ends in despair. David, though fleeing and humiliated, finds provision and encouragement. The Lord is still guiding events. The rebellion appears powerful, but God is quietly gathering the people and resources David will need for what comes next.

Practical Application

Crisis often reveals whose voice we are willing to follow. Absalom had two counselors in front of him. One offered sound strategy; the other appealed to pride and image. Absalom chose the advice that made him look powerful rather than the advice that was most effective. We face similar moments when we must decide whether to follow wisdom or what flatters us.

This chapter also reminds us that pride clouds judgment. Hushai's plan succeeded because it appealed to Absalom's desire for glory. Instead of acting wisely, Absalom sought the dramatic victory that would boost his reputation. When pride guides decisions, even intelligent people can make harmful choices.

At the same time, we see how God quietly works through ordinary people and small moments. Messengers running through the night, a woman hiding them in a well, and friends providing food and shelter all become part of God's protection. What seems small or ordinary can be used by God in powerful ways.

We also see the danger of wisdom separated from righteousness. Ahithophel was known for brilliant counsel, yet his wisdom was used to support rebellion. Intelligence alone does not lead to truth. Wisdom must be rooted in loyalty to God, or it becomes destructive.

Finally, David's situation reminds us that God's purposes continue even when circumstances appear uncertain. David is no longer in the palace. He is moving through the wilderness with a small group of followers. Yet God is already protecting him and providing what he needs. When we cannot see the outcome clearly, we are still called to trust that God is guiding the story.

Conclusion

While people make plans, God still guides the outcome. Absalom seemed to have the upper hand. He controlled the capital, had the support of many in Israel, and the advice of a brilliant strategist. From a human point of view, David's situation looked hopeless. Yet the Lord was quietly working behind the scenes. Hushai's words slowed down the attack. Messengers delivered warnings to David at just the right time. Loyal supporters provided food, shelter, and encouragement when they were needed most. Each event might have seemed small on its own, but together they reveal God's careful guidance.

We also saw the difference between wisdom and righteousness. Ahithophel was known for wise counsel, yet his wisdom served rebellion. When his plan failed, his confidence collapsed. David, on the other hand, continued to move forward with humility and trust, even when his future looked uncertain.

Second Samuel 17 reminds us that God's purposes do not depend on human strength or clever plans. Even when circumstances appear unfavorable, the Lord is still able to protect, provide, and direct events toward His will.

For Discussion

1. Why did Absalom choose Hushai's advice instead of Ahithophel's, even though Ahithophel's plan was stronger?

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2. What does this chapter teach us about how pride can influence the decisions we make?

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3. How do the actions of the messengers and the woman who hid them show God working through ordinary people?

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4. What can we learn from the contrast between Ahithophel's response to failure and David's trust in God during uncertainty?

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5. How does this chapter help us see that God is still at work even when circumstances seem unfavorable?

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