



Studies in the Life of David

Text

Second Samuel 17:24-18:18

Topic

Retreating from David's men, Absalom gets stuck in a tree and Joab kills him while he is hanging there

Title

"Just Hang Loser"

Introduction

I can almost hear ring announcer Michael Buffer saying, *"Let's get ready to rumble!"*

King David and his forces and followers had crossed the Jordan River, buying them a little time to get battle-readied. David's traitorous son, Absalom, had mustered Israel's remaining troops and was making his way to engage his father in a winner-take-all showdown.

Their conflict provides us an opportunity to think about our own spiritual battles as we follow our king, Jesus Christ. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Your King Deserves That You Be Battle Readied, and #2 Your King Decrees That You Be Battle Tested.

#1 Your King Deserves That You Be Battle-Readied
(17:24-18:4)

Every now and then it's good to remind ourselves of what the apostle Paul said in Second Corinthians 10:6 and 11. With regard to the history of the people in the Old Testament, he said, "... these things became our

examples... all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition...”

While these Old Testament stories are true and historical, they are also given to us as examples, as types, as illustrations, of our own spiritual lives.

Looking at these opening verses from the perspective of a type, we see that the forces and followers of the king readied for battle. Thus we are being encouraged through their example to ready and be readied for our spiritual battles.

2 Samuel 17:24 Then David went to Mahanaim. And Absalom crossed over the Jordan, he and all the men of Israel with him.

2 Samuel 17:25 And Absalom made Amasa captain of the army instead of Joab. This Amasa was the son of a man whose name was Jithra, an Israelite, who had gone in to Abigail the daughter of Nahash, sister of Zeruiah, Joab's mother.

2 Samuel 17:26 So Israel and Absalom encamped in the land of Gilead.

Of note in this description of Absalom's men is the statement that “Amasa was the son of a man... who had gone in to Abigail...” That means he was an illegitimate child.

It reminds us that this entire battle was, in a sense, illegitimate. Absalom was not the rightful king. His followers were deceived. Just so, the devil is not the rightful king but nevertheless is called “the god of this world” and “the prince of the power of the air.” He's waging a war against the followers of Jesus, taking nonbelievers captive to do his will and oppose us.

2 Samuel 17:27 Now it happened, when David had come to Mahanaim, that Shobi the son of Nahash from Rabbah of the people of Ammon, Machir the son of Ammiel from Lo Debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim,

2 Samuel 17:28 brought beds and basins, earthen vessels and wheat, barley and flour, parched grain and beans, lentils and parched seeds,

2 Samuel 17:29 honey and curds, sheep and cheese of the herd, for David and the people who were with him to eat. For they said, "The people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness."

Mahanaim was a fortified city so it made sense to go there. The word means *double-camp*. The site was first named by the patriarch Jacob.

Right before he named it he was met by the angels of God, prompting him to say, “this is God’s camp,” using the word *mahanaim*.

You could describe a gathering of believers on the earth as *mahanaim* - as God’s camp, a double-camp consisting of God’s people and the presence of God. The inference is that to be battle-readied we must gather at *mahanaim*, gather with others, and experience the presence of our King.

The various people listed in these verses are those David had shown kindness and mercy towards. They have an opportunity to respond to David’s kindness and mercy by giving him of their provisions so that his troops will be strengthened and readied for the fight.

Has God shown you kindness and mercy? Yes, incredibly so, if you are saved and on your way to Heaven! You are to respond by giving to God from out of your resources to strengthen His troops.

Giving, and by that I mean financially, is one of the key disciplines of the Christian life. Yet giving is not really practiced by most believers and it is down across the board even more than usual in recent years.

Look at it this way. We get riled-up, do we not, when our military men and women are not provided with the very best equipment for carrying out their tasks? **We need to have an even greater sense of supplying the work of the Lord.**

2 Samuel 18:1 And David numbered the people who were with him, and set captains of thousands and captains of hundreds over them.

2 Samuel 18:2 Then David sent out one third of the people under the hand of Joab, one third under the hand of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the hand of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the people, "I also will surely go out with you myself."

David alone had the authority to assign his troops and set them in their proper organization. We see in this what we sometimes call “the headship of Jesus Christ.” He is the head and we are His body. He gifts us and organizes us as He sees fit. When we are submitted to one another, when

we recognize His authority in the delegated authority He has placed over us, we are able to do great things in His stead.

It's true we are all equals. But it does not follow that there is no organization or that a Christian need not be connected to a local body. Those whose contact with a church is light, or who set themselves up to be independent of authority, are ignoring the headship of Jesus. There are lessons to be learned, growth to be had, in submitting to the Lord's delegated authority.

Look at it this way. Suppose our military men and women had the attitude that they didn't really need to submit to authority but could develop their own groups and fight whoever and whenever they wanted. It wouldn't work!

David said, "I also will surely go out with you Myself." We are reminded of the Lord Jesus promising that He would never leave us or forsake us. We are reminded that the Holy Spirit indwells us and can empower us.

When pursuing types and illustrations in Old Testament texts, it's important to realize that since these are genuine histories, not every detail will match up perfectly. David is a type of Jesus Christ, but obviously not every detail of David's life can be seen as representative of the Lord.

In verses three and four we want to be careful to not misrepresent the Lord when the followers of David demanded he remain at Mahanaim and he submitted to them.

2 Samuel 18:3 But the people answered, "You shall not go out! For if we flee away, they will not care about us; nor if half of us die, will they care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us now. For you are now more help to us in the city."

2 Samuel 18:4 Then the king said to them, "Whatever seems best to you I will do." So the king stood beside the gate, and all the people went out by hundreds and by thousands.

David's people say of him, "you are worth ten thousand of us." Do we not sing of Jesus that "He's the fairest of ten thousand"? Indeed, He is!

Obviously we should never say to Jesus, “Hang back! We’ve got this.” Sadly, we sometimes *do* act as though we don’t need His help!

David would be physically absent from the battle, waiting for his people in the city. Jesus is physically absent, having ascended into Heaven, and is building our homes in the city of God, the New Jerusalem.

Jesus **is** “more help to us in the city.” He told His disciples that it was good He go away so that He could send the Helper, the Holy Spirit, to be in us and to come upon us for our walk on the earth as we await His return from Heaven to take us home.

These verses paint a picture of Christians, and of the church on earth, being battle-readied. Listen to the Spirit; He’s talking to you, applying these things in your particular situation. Be encouraged; be exhorted.

#2 Your King Decrees That You Be Battle-Tested (18:5-18)

David commanded his troops to deal mercifully with Absalom.

2 Samuel 18:5 Now the king had commanded Joab, Abishai, and Ittai, saying, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave all the captains orders concerning Absalom.

Sure, he is David’s son, but his rebellion and the destruction he caused, including the death of 20,000 in this battle alone, defy David’s call for mercy.

We’ve seen before and we will see again that Absalom is a type of Satan. How much more shocked are we to know that the Lord has defeated Satan at the Cross but allows him to go on roaming about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour?

I mean, seriously, the first time you read the opening chapters of Job, aren’t you mind-blown that Satan still has access to the throne of God? That God gives him permission to go after Job?

In the case of the devil it isn't to show him mercy that God allows him to go on. God uses him to test us. We must be battle-tested as to our faith and faithfulness. It's been said that "a faith not worth testing is a faith not worth having."

2 Samuel 18:6 So the people went out into the field of battle against Israel. And the battle was in the woods of Ephraim.

2 Samuel 18:7 The people of Israel were overthrown there before the servants of David, and a great slaughter of twenty thousand took place there that day.

2 Samuel 18:8 For the battle there was scattered over the face of the whole countryside, and the woods devoured more people that day than the sword devoured.

It was a mistake for Absalom to allow David to set the location of the battle. They fought in the thick woods, in the "countryside," rather than on open ground. David was a master of guerilla tactics and his men were used to stealth.

You can think of yourself, and other believers, as a sort of guerilla force on the earth. God has inserted you somewhere in order to soldier for Him by sharing His love, grace and mercy with others.

I'm intrigued by the phrase, "the woods devoured more people that day than the sword devoured." Either Absalom's troops were extremely clumsy or there was a supernatural element at work.

2 Samuel 18:9 Then Absalom met the servants of David. Absalom rode on a mule. The mule went under the thick boughs of a great terebinth tree, and his head caught in the terebinth; so he was left hanging between heaven and earth. And the mule which was under him went on.

It's an old-school version of that scene in *The Return of the Jedi* when Luke Skywalker was being chased through the woods of Endor. The Imperial Stormtroopers kept hitting the trees. Here the servants of Absalom were getting clobbered somehow by the trees.

Absalom's "head" got caught in one of the trees. We always say it was his thick and beautiful hair that got hung up. Remember that we read in a previous chapter that he cut his hair once a year and that the clipping weighed about 6 pounds!

The text says only that it was his “head.” The Jewish historian Josephus, in his account, says it was his hair, and that seems to make sense.

Notice the interesting way Absalom’s predicament was described: “he was... hanging between Heaven and earth.” I alluded earlier to one of the titles of Satan, that he is called “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). He’s hanging around in the air between Heaven and earth.

Although Satan has access to Heaven when summoned there, he was cast out, along with a third of the other angels that followed him in his rebellion. They have access to the earth but will not be confined to the earth until after the church is raptured. Mean time Satan and his forces, then, are between Heaven and earth.

2 Samuel 18:10 Now a certain man saw it and told Joab, and said, "I just saw Absalom hanging in a terebinth tree!"

2 Samuel 18:11 So Joab said to the man who told him, "You just saw him! And why did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have given you ten shekels of silver and a belt."

2 Samuel 18:12 But the man said to Joab, "Though I were to receive a thousand shekels of silver in my hand, I would not raise my hand against the king's son. For in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, saying, 'Beware lest anyone touch the young man Absalom!'

2 Samuel 18:13 Otherwise I would have dealt falsely against my own life. For there is nothing hidden from the king, and you yourself would have set yourself against me."

Interesting exchange. What can we make of it?

The first thing I would suggest is that we can't be sure who was right.

- On the one hand we could think that Joab was right because Absalom was a rebel.
- On the other we could think this “certain man” was right because he was obeying the direct order of the king.

The unnamed soldier did no harm; he didn't free Absalom or let him escape. It's therefore hard to fault him. Joab had a greater authority than the soldier to make field decisions. It's hard to fault him.

Maybe the lesson for us is that two soldiers can look at the same situation, or we would say ‘ministry,’ differently, depending upon their roles and maturity. As long as the Lord’s work gets done in a way that honors and glorifies Him, that’s the key.

To me the sad part of the exchange between the soldier and Joab is that Joab is immediately and unnecessarily critical while, for his part, the soldier describes Joab as someone who won’t support his troops when push comes to shove. They had awful camaraderie even though they fought side-by-side.

Part of being battle-tested is not just getting the job done. It is getting it done with love toward each other. How we minister is as important as the ministry itself. In fact, a lot of what happens is, I think, designed by the Lord to test our relationships rather than the results we’re trying to achieve.

2 Samuel 18:14 Then Joab said, "I cannot linger with you." And he took three spears in his hand and thrust them through Absalom's heart, while he was still alive in the midst of the terebinth tree.

In the KJV instead of “spears” it reads “darts.” Whatever size these were isn’t the point. The word “darts” reminds me of the fact that Satan is described as attacking with “fiery darts” (Ephesians 6:16). It’s a small clue that we can see Absalom as a type.

Although he is loose on the earth and dangerous, in another sense the devil is in no position to harm you if you appropriate the victory of Jesus over him at the Cross. He’s just ‘hanging around,’ defeated, waiting for things to run their course.

2 Samuel 18:15 And ten young men who bore Joab's armor surrounded Absalom, and struck and killed him.

2 Samuel 18:16 So Joab blew the trumpet, and the people returned from pursuing Israel. For Joab held back the people.

Joab was the proverbial ‘bad dude.’ It took “ten young men” to carry his armor. He was someone you didn’t mess around with on the field of battle. He had the skills and the disposition to match them.

Trumpets were used to direct troop movements and make important announcements. Apparently there was a trumpet code for ‘the battle is over ‘cause I’ve just killed Absalom.’ David’s troops, acting as one, “returned.”

It may sound obvious but when it comes to serving the Lord we need to be clear about what we’re doing. We need to communicate with one another, know our objectives, and work together to achieve them.

2 Samuel 18:17 And they took Absalom and cast him into a large pit in the woods, and laid a very large heap of stones over him. Then all Israel fled, everyone to his tent.

Why this impromptu burial? Two things come to mind:

1. First, it reflected what was due Absalom under the law of Moses. A rebellious child was to be taken out of the camp and stoned to death. Now Absalom was already dead, but his burial under a “large heap of stones” represented the stoning he deserved.
2. Second, it eliminated the possibility of David making a big event out of Absalom’s burial. As we will see, David almost snatches defeat from the jaws of victory by his over-mourning for Absalom.

On a typological level Absalom’s burial in the pit reminds me that after his rebellion comes to its head during the Great Tribulation, Satan will be bound and cast into a pit for a thousand years before being cast into the Lake of Fire for all eternity.

2 Samuel 18:18 Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up a pillar for himself, which is in the King's Valley. For he said, "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance." He called the pillar after his own name. And to this day it is called Absalom's Monument.

Absalom was what we today call ‘a legend in his own mind.’ Having no living sons to carry on after him he thought to commemorate himself by erecting a marble monument.

What is your legacy? While the world encourages us to build monuments of stone, as it were, we are capable in the Lord of building a spiritual house. We can instill in our children a knowledge of and a love for the Lord. We

can serve the Lord with our time, with our talent, and with our things, storing up for ourselves an inheritance in Heaven and obtaining for ourselves spiritual offspring.

It's important to be battle-readied. You also need to be battle-tested. The situations you find yourself in each day, they are the arena of your spiritual battles. It is at home, at work, in school, out in the world at large, that your readiness is put to the test.

Every encounter is one in which you can respond with love, grace, and mercy and thus turn the fiery darts of the devil against him.

