

Providential Security in Promised Success

2 Samuel 17

*For the Lord had **ordained to defeat** the good counsel of Ahithophel, **so that** the Lord might bring harm upon Absalom.*

Introduction: Life is full of decisions, and in one way, independence in adulthood is defined by the fact that we are free to make these decisions and live with the consequences. We make decisions, take responsibility, and enjoy the fruit in the future. But we also know that in making decisions about finances, housing, spouse, career, and location, some factors are ultimately **out of our control**. We know that investing and saving money is good and biblical, but we are beholden to the market or the good name of our government backing up our deposits. We trust that in owning a home and insuring it, it will be a place of dwelling and growing value, despite the fact that fires, earthquakes, or floods are a thing. We hope that the person we marry is the real deal and was honest about their character. We hope that the industry we are in will last or the job we possess will still be there tomorrow. We trust that institutions, policies, and programs will deliver, and that things like *Social Security* will be “too big to fail”, ensuring that the money we put in will be there to take out some day.

Why do we start this way? In all of life, we are responsible for our decision and actions, but we understand there is something bigger and greater than us that dictate outcomes. In our life in the Lord, this is the interaction between **human responsibility and God's sovereignty**, the freedom God gives us as free standing moral agents who can discern right and wrong, make choices accordingly, and are thus accountable for our actions. This is NOT an even partnership, of course, since God is ultimately in control and the author of all things, but He never absolves us from choices. This is why we cannot play the **victim** card in decision making, throwing up our hands and saying someone *else is responsible for our actions and decisions*. No, God gives us opportunities despite external factors.

So we have been given a measure of freedom, but that freedom is always subservient to God's plans and purposes, meaning that even our choices, decisions, and EVEN our SINFUL actions CANNOT thwart what He intends to accomplish. This is exceptional news for us. This is an **ultimate comfort to us**, since if we had the capacity to mess up His plans, we would! This is what Job understood on the other side of suffering in **Job 42:2**:

*I know that you can do all things, and **that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.***

This is the **comfort** Isaiah gave to Israel as He called them to repentance but prepared them for exile in **Isaiah 40:21-23**:

*Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;
who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.*

True freedom in life, then, is NOT moving AWAY from God in individualistic humanism but rather resting completely and submissively in the sovereign grace of God. This is what David experienced AFTER he had reached the height of power and influence as the greatest king on the earth. Humility before God is the most secure place to be in the world, which frees us up to live for His glory.

Now, if you are new here or have not been with us for a few weeks, let's catch up to where we've been in David's life. After reaching the zenith of his kingship and kingdom, including the fact that God promised an eternal kingdom and throne through him, David chose a path of sin for a time, including adultery, deception, and murder. Though he was amazingly and graciously forgiven and restored, the consequences of his sin were heavy. David's son raped his daughter, prompting another to murder his brother. This set the stage for **Absalom** to flee for his life, returning when David was prompted to bring him back to Jerusalem without any change or repentance. For four years, Absalom won the hearts and minds of the people, culminating in a *coup d'état*, running David out and claiming the throne for himself. Several *loyalists* remained with David, but many turned their back on him, including his trusted counselor named **Ahithophel**, the grandpa of *Bathsheba*, the woman with whom David committed adultery. When David heard this happened, his sad heart responsively prayed, "**O LORD, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness**" (2 Sam. 15:31). Chapter 17 sees this prayer answered dramatically.

David was on the run, but he had sent back loyal friends back to Jerusalem as double agents. **Zadok and Abiathar**, faithful priests, went back to Jerusalem with the Ark of the Covenant and were to be David's eyes and ears in the city. But his greatest ally was **Hushai the Archite**, a true friend, who was to defeat the counsel of Ahithophel for David (2 Sam. 15:34). **NOTE:** This is how faithful and trust driven prayer works. We pray and trust in the Lord to answer our prayer, and we **act and live by faith** in obedience, whether it's a prayer of salvation for someone or a physical need or even *waiting on Him*, which means we are *active in our patience*. We ended last week with a **dividing line being laid down**: Ahithophel gave Absalom the counsel to sexually violate David's 10 concubines on the roof of his palace, an egregious deed that would make Absalom and his followers a **stench** to David and **strengthen** those that followed him.

Now, the scene is truly bleak. *If you were David, what hope would you cling to?* All the chips were on Absalom's side of the table, and now he went all in holding a monster hand. Yes, he had loyalists and spies, but he was on the run with a couple of thousand people and soldiers, did not have his army, and the heart of the people was for his son, who had crafted a masterful and devious plan. Would David trust himself, spiral down to depression, or would he remember the **promises of 2 Samuel 7** where God told him he would be planted in Jerusalem, with rest from enemies, with a house and a kingdom forever! Even David's sins, though grievous, could not undo the promises of God, which is a message all of us should cling to this morning. God works through His **providential care to bring security to His own, exercising His unseen but mighty hand in all of life to bring about His purposes**.

SHREWD COUNSEL UNRECEIVED (1-4)

Moreover, Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue David tonight. 2 I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged and throw him into a panic, and all the people who are with him will flee. I will strike down only the king, 3 and I will bring all the people back to you as a bride comes home to her husband. You seek the life of only one man, and all the people will be at peace." 4 And the advice seemed right in the eyes of Absalom and all the elders of Israel.

For whatever reason, which the Scripture does NOT state, Ahithophel had made a choice of loyalty, switching from David to his son Absalom. Whether this was from the perceived political winds blowing, a deep seated bitterness about his granddaughter, or simply seeing more potential in the son, Ahithophel made a *calculated, convictional, and whole-hearted party switch*. As the dust of David's group leaving

the city was still settling, he came to Absalom with a plan to finish the job. **In 42 Hebrew words**, he gave a succinct battle plan – which is why he was an unusual politician – which was superb:

- 1) **We will use OVERWHELMING FORCE** – He wanted to muster up 12,000 troops, most likely a number that were local and able to leave immediately, which would have given him a 5-1 or 6-1 advantage against David’s force
- 2) **We will use the ELEMENT OF SURPRISE** – Notice that he wanted to leave that very night and catch up to David before he could mount a resistance or defensive stand. In a military sense, this is proper and effective strategy
- 3) **We will have a NARROWLY DEFINED PURPOSE** – Often plans are INEFFECTIVE because the measure of success is too broad. Here he said it plainly: our goal is to take **David out alone** – which will lead all others to be discouraged and be brought back to the kingdom, since we do not want to kill our own brothers but simply change leadership.

Here is the interesting thing about life sometimes. This plan set forth was received well by Absalom and his advisers, and WOULD HAVE WORKED. But it ultimately did not. Why? There were other plans at play.

SHREWDER COUNSEL RECEIVED (5-14a)

Then Absalom said, “Call Hushai the Archite also, and let us hear what he has to say.” 6 And when Hushai came to Absalom, Absalom said to him, “Thus has Ahithophel spoken; shall we do as he says? If not, you speak.” 7 Then Hushai said to Absalom, “This time the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good.” 8 Hushai said, “You know that your father and his men are mighty men, and that they are enraged, like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field. Besides, your father is expert in war; he will not spend the night with the people. 9 Behold, even now he has hidden himself in one of the pits or in some other place. And as soon as some of the people fall at the first attack, whoever hears it will say, ‘There has been a slaughter among the people who follow Absalom.’ 10 Then even the valiant man, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will utterly melt with fear, for all Israel knows that your father is a mighty man, and that those who are with him are valiant men. 11 But my counsel is that all Israel be gathered to you, from Dan to Beersheba, as the sand by the sea for multitude, and that you go to battle in person. 12 So we shall come upon him in some place where he is to be found, and we shall light upon him as the dew falls on the ground, and of him and all the men with him not one will be left. 13 If he withdraws into a city, then all Israel will bring ropes to that city, and we shall drag it into the valley, until not even a pebble is to be found there.” 14 And Absalom and all the men of Israel said, “The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel

For some inexplicable reason, Absalom decided to bring in David’s friend and advisor to see what he thought of Ahithophel’s plan. Perhaps this was the youthful inexperience of Absalom or the obvious insecurity of a first time leader, but he brought in **Hushai** and laid out the whole plan, and then asked what **HE thought**. It is clear that Hushai knew David’s condition in leaving, since his own coat was torn and dirt was on his head in mourning (2 Sam. 15:32). David’s group had family with him, and though he had loyal and faithful soldiers, they were in NO WAY ready for this kind of force or fight. No, Hushai knew he needed to **thwart this plan**, and at the very least, **buy time for David to gain some distance between himself and Jerusalem**. So instead of a 42-word plan, Hushai gave a filibustering, masterful soliloquy that takes up **129 Hebrew words**, three times as many as the first.

- 1) **He discredits Ahithophel’s plan** – Notice he did this in a clear but tactful way. He alluded to the fact that Ahithophel is typically good, but THIS TIME it simply was NOT a good one

- 2) **He undermined Absalom's confidence** – Absalom was the typical kid of a successful father who had never really DONE anything or accomplished something for himself, but had watched and heard of his father's greatness. Hushai appealed to the legend. "You know your father, and he'll move spots each night, won't ever sleep with the group, and is a master at evading tactics. He is a war fighter, an expert in battle, and you know when he and his mighty men are riled up, they are like bears!" Again, Hushai knew that this was a thin reality, but it played on past realities, and a swift end to this battle seemed less and less likely
- 3) **He magnified Absalom's fears** – Not only would it not be as swift as was first counseled, but when the fighting starts and men start dying, the heart of the people will start to die with it. It's clear Ahithophel knew the cost of change and leadership, but Absalom wanted to continue to curry the favor of the people. He liked being liked, and no leader can please everyone and be effective. So now that the cost of the plan was in real people and numbers, his heart began to waiver.
- 4) **He played to Absalom's pride** – Absalom was not hard to read, since most prideful people are not. Hushai played against his pride two ways: **First**, don't let Ahithophel have all the planning, execution, and thus glory! Do you want the people to sing songs about HIM, or you? **Second**, instead of small force, bring the BIGGEST FORCE POSSIBLE, from the God given borders of the land, and let us surround him and wipe EVERYONE out and leave NO DOUBT! **Pride** typically vies for bigger and better, and if this job could be done with 12,000, it could DEFINITELY be done with 10x's that many! One could almost envision Absalom's eyes light up at the thought of leading this overwhelming force into battle. At this long counsel, Absalom and his elders believed THIS COUNSEL was better than Ahithophel's. Hushai did exactly what he hoped. However, this did not solve the problem.
- 5) **He bought David precious time** – For sake of time, vv. 15-22 tell of how the message got to David. Still not knowing which counsel was taken, the message was to be given to the priests' sons, **Jonathan and Ahimaaz**, by a servant girl at En Rogel. But they were seen, and so they had to high tale it to Bahurim, about a mile further east, where they hid in a well and were covered up by a woman until the pursuers moved on. After this harrowing adventure, they came to David and told him the counsel given to Absalom, not to stop, but to get over the Jordan River immediately. Verse 24 says that David reached **Mahahaim before Absalom's forces could catch up to him**, which we will see next week.

An amazing story of bravery, shrewdness, and courageous action. Each member of the story risked their lives and would have most likely have died if caught. And if I were a better story teller we'd have tension right now as the story unfolded. But the story is NOT the most amazing part of this chapter. That belongs to a single verse, or rather **14 Hebrew words**, in the middle.

PROVIDENTIAL PURPOSE ORDAINED (14b)

For the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring harm upon Absalom.

This is the point of the chapter. *Why did Absalom listen to Hushai? Why did the counsel of Ahithophel fail? Why did David ultimately get out of these circumstances?* BECAUSE GOD ORDAINED IT! How did

God work it out? Through normal circumstances that we would chalk up to chance, luck, or wised tactics. Here is how **Dale Davis** explains this reality of God's purposes and providence:

*"That is the explanation for the whole story, for all this which has occurred so naturally, so humanly, so freely. Yahweh had ordained it. That may (and should) raise some questions for you. But remember: **Yahweh's sovereignty is not meant to give you philosophical problems but spiritual comfort.** And the primary characteristic of his sovereignty in this passage is its **HIDDENNESS**. There are not trumpets, no turmoil, no billboards or bumper stickers. Not glitzy, frenetic commercials like car dealers blast out on television. Only this quiet text, this discreet aside. The plot against Yahweh's king has gone to pot. **Why? Yahweh had ordained it.**"¹*

14 words of hope, that God did not forget His promise to David, though he faced the consequences of his sin. 14 words that remind us that God is at work IN ALL AREAS OF LIFE, even though people refuse to acknowledge or stop looking. We are reminded that God is at work in and through circumstances and choices to accomplish His purposes and will.

In light of this, let me leave you with **two main principles of application from this chapter**:

First, we trust in God's sovereign hand in all things, even when life and circumstances seem the bleakest. NOTHING, not one thing, can thwart God's purpose and plan in our life. We can know and understand our security in Him when we understand this. The other night Luci and I were walking down the street in Anaheim when a man who was clearly on some substance, shouting obscenities, and yelling threats approached. Instinctively, she switched sides and put herself behind me. As he passed by, I said, "I'm not sure what I'd do if he engaged us. I hope I'd try to talk him down, but I do know he wouldn't get to you." If a weak, imperfect, and earthly father would not let anyone get to his daughter, how much more would our heavenly father:

*For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, **will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Romans 8:38-39)*

David was not separated from God's promises, through a coup of a son, the betrayal of friends, or even his OWN SIN. When we say God works all things out for good, for those who are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28), He means it.

Second, there is no middle ground in following God in Christ. The chapter records the demise of Ahithophel, who knew that when his counsel was not taken he not only lost credibility but that his side would actually lose, meaning he'd have to answer to David. So he killed himself. (17:23) He had chosen sides, and he chose the wrong and losing one. It is a good reminder to all this morning. There is no such thing as a third way with the Lord. We are either a follower of Jesus or a rebel, one of His children or His enemy, one who is at peace or one who is still searching for it. Ahithophel is like so many who believe they can find a better way APART from the Lord, thinking their motives are good and purposes pure. But in the end, there are only two ways: one that leads to life that is narrow and hard, and one that leads to destruction that is broad and easy. We heard the testimony of two men who God graciously allowed to find the narrow path that leads to life. Our call this morning is to all: turn from your sin and

¹ Dale David, "2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity" p. 215-16.

your way, repent and believe, and follow the God who loves and gives His Son, who died in our place and offers us forgiveness of sin.

This is where ultimate security is found: not in ourselves but in the sovereign hand of God.