

David Mourns Absalom

Second Samuel 18:19 to 19:8a

DIG: What were the two runners attempting to do? Why did Ahimaaz persist in his request? What did the choice of each messenger depend upon? Favoritism? Running ability? Eagerness? The content of the particular message? Why was David so preoccupied with Absalom's safety and so little concerned with his own or those of his soldiers? What did David temporarily set aside while he was grieving over Absalom? How can leaders still lead while suffering? Was Joab justified in his rebuke of David?

REFLECT: What would you have said to David, or to your army, if you were faced with the morale problem described by Joab? From what "enemies" has YHVH recently delivered you from? If that enemy is no longer a threat, with what new set of problems must you now contend? With what have you been preoccupied lately? And if the worst-case scenario comes to pass, what will happen? Then what will you do? What role does your faith play in this regard? How is the heart of God revealed in the heart of David as he wept over Absalom? How does this affect you?

976 BC

The civil war was over and the rebellion crushed. All that remained was for Joab to notify the king and return him safely to Jerusalem. But it was a bittersweet victory for David. When the enemy is your own son, there can be no triumph. No celebration.

Who would tell David? Now Ahimaaz son of Zadok said: Let me run and take the news to the king that ADONAI has vindicated him by delivering him from the hand of his enemies. Ahimaaz was a well-known runner and he volunteered to take the news to the king at Mahanaim, some three miles away. Even though he was very enthusiastic, he didn't realize what he was asking for. Joab knew that the message needed to be conveyed with compassion and skill. All Ahimaaz knew was that the battle was won and David had to be told. "You are not the one to take the news today," the general told him. Ahimaaz was the son of Zadok the priest, a close associate of Joab; one does not send the son of another ranking cabinet officer on a high-risk mission. The mission was risky because the king's son was dead. The exchange between Ahimaaz and Joab is burdened and ominous, even though understated. Joab didn't know how David would respond, but he knew it wouldn't be good (Second Samuel 18:19-20a).⁴⁴⁶

Joab knew that if David saw Ahimaaz, the king would assume all the news was good; and while the victory was good news, the death of Absalom would be bad news. "You may take the news another time when the news is better, but you must not do so today, because the king's son is dead." Then, to protect Ahimaaz, Joab selected a person only known as the Cushite (probably one of his own servants), "Go, tell the king what you have seen." The Cushite bowed down before Joab and then ran off. Undeterred, Ahimaaz continued to annoy Joab and ask for permission to run. Again said to Joab, "Come what may, please let me run behind the Cushite." But Joab replied: My son, why do you want to go? You don't have any news that will bring you a reward. Persistent to the end, Ahimaaz pleads a third time, saying: Come what may, I want to run behind him. Weary of hearing the young man continue to badger him about the matter, Joab relented and gave his approval. Ahimaaz's route, though less direct and therefore a mile or two longer than that of the Cushite, would be over smoother and more level ground which enabled him to arrive at Mahanaim in less time (Second Samuel 18:20b-23). So even though the Cushite had a head start, Ahimaaz outran him.

Two runners: The scene switches to the king, anxiously waiting for good news in Mahanaim. While David was sitting between the inner and outer gates waiting for news of the conflict, the watchman went up to the roof of the gateway by the wall. As he looked out, he saw a man running alone. The watchman called out to the king and reported it. The king said: If he is alone, he must be a courier and have good news (many runners meant they were running from the enemy). And the runner came closer and closer. Then the watchman saw another runner, and he called down to the gatekeeper, "Look, another man running alone." The king said: He must be bringing good news also (Second Samuel 18:24-26).

The First Message from Ahimaaz: The watchman said: It seems to me that the first one runs like Ahimaaz son of Zadok. "He's a good man," the king said, "He comes with good news." David assumed that a person like Ahimaaz would not be chosen to bring bad news. This was the very reason Joab didn't want to send Ahimaaz to begin with. When he approached David, Ahimaaz, not knowing exactly what to say simply called out, "Shalom." He bowed down before the king with his face to the ground and blurted out a positive summary: Praise be to YHVH your God! He has delivered up those who lifted their hands against my lord the king. Only then was David told of the victory. But the king was also expecting good news about Absalom. The vagueness of the message only intensified David's anxiety. So the king asked: Is the young man Absalom safe? That's all that really counts. But Ahimaaz, so eager to reach the king first, ended up having nothing to say. He answered, probably looking at the ground: I saw great confusion just as Joab was about to send the

king's servant and me, your servant, but I don't know what it was. Ahimaaz was lying through his teeth. Absalom was dead. When Ahimaaz had his chance, he turned coward. When he actually was in the presence of the king and saw his anguish, he couldn't bring himself to tell David and pretended not to know. Then the king said: **Stand aside and wait here. Then he stepped aside, stood there and watched the Cushite deliver the right message in the right way (Second Samuel 18:27-30).**

The Second Message from the Cushite: Then the Cushite arrived and gave a straight answer, but nevertheless tried to break the news gently. He said: **My lord the king, hear the good news! The LORD has vindicated you today by delivering you from the hand of all who rose up against you.** For the second time David is told about the victory but he still didn't know about Absalom. So the king asked the Cushite, **"Is the young man Absalom safe?"** The Cushite replied: **May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you (Hebrew: *raah* meaning for evil, misery, distress, injury) be like that young man (Second Samuel 18:31-32).** The Cushite was a lot more direct and honest. But that was not the good news David wanted to hear.

David Mourns Absalom: The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: **O my son Absalom! My son my son Absalom! If only I (in the emphatic position) had died instead of you - O Absalom, my son, my son (Second Samuel 18:33).** There is no doubt that deep affection played a part in David's response. But there is a deeper dimension to David's grief. As we must use 17:14b to control our overall view of 18:1 to 19:8, we must also use 12:10 to illumine David's sorrows. How Nathan's words must have echoed in David's conscience: **Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house.** It was David's guilt that inflamed his grief.⁴⁴⁷

If David had led his men as he had originally intended instead of being shut-up in his own thoughts, he might have avoided the emotional impasse that prevented him from appreciating all that his army had endured in order to achieve his victory. But he was dealing with guilt. He was well aware that his adultery had caused all the problems in his family. He was tormented. He was a father who had never taken the necessary steps to correct his ambitious and spoiled son. So here, David expressed the wish that he would have died in his place. So we end with a paradox: a safe kingdom and a despondent king.

While the king was still far from Jerusalem, submerged in grief, the army was unrewarded and the country leaderless. It was a dangerous situation in which some upstart could attempt to seize power; and in the absence of any prophetic word, Joab played the key role in the difficult task of bringing David out of his mental fog.⁴⁴⁸

Joab was told, "The king is weeping and mourning for Absalom." The commander could not have been altogether surprised by the news that the king was grieving for his son; but for the victorious army, it was hard to accept that David had no word of appreciation for their courage and sacrifice in battle. And for the whole army the victory that day was turned into mourning, because on that day the troops heard it said: The king is grieving for his son. The men stole into the City that day as men steal in who are ashamed when they flee from battle. David could not have ignored the army more completely if it had returned defeated. There was no victory march. The king covered his face and cried aloud, "O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son (Second Samuel 19:1-4)! He shut everyone out; he wanted to be alone.

Joab's Disapproval: Then Joab went into the house to the king. He knew he had to break into David's misery and isolation if David was going to have any credibility as king. The general was a brutal man and he said things to David that only someone in his position could say: Today you have humiliated all your men, who have just saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters and the lives of your wives and concubines because Absalom would have slaughtered everyone if he had been victorious. The heart of Joab's complaint was this: You love those who hate you and hate those who love you. You have made it clear today that the commanders and their men mean nothing to you. They were being dishonored. I see that you would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all of us were dead. The hard-hitting sequence was calculated to bring David face to face with the reality that he couldn't bring Absalom back, and he was the king and he needed to put his personal feelings aside and act like one!

Having said his piece, Joab proceeded to deliver an ultimatum. Now go out and encourage your men. Immediate action was needed to retain the allegiance of the army. I swear by ADONAI that if you don't go out, not a man will be left with you by nightfall. This will be worse for you than all the calamities that have come on you from your youth until now (Second Samuel 19:5-7). This was no small matter. David's victory was won at great risk.⁴⁴⁹

David's Appearance: So the king got up and took his seat in the gateway (Second Samuel 19:8a). But by then there was no one to greet him. No mention is made of his speaking kindly, or indeed of his speaking to anyone at all. When the men were told, "The king is sitting in the gateway," they all came before him. And then they saw his face with its evidence of suffering and grief. From this we sense that the crisis was avoided. His supporters remained loyal.

David had a choice to make; to continue in grief over the consequences of **his** repented sins - or to look up to **God** and see **His** holiness, love and power. Though our children are greatly influenced by their upbringing, yet their choices as adults are their own. We have the fantastic opportunity of prayer, of calling out to **ADONAI** for them that **He** softens their heart and draws them to **Himself**. **The LORD** loves our children even more than we do and he so desires great joy and peace for each of our children. **YHVH** listens to our prayers and has promised to answer our prayer, doing what is according to **His** will (**First John 5:14-15**). Prayer is a much better option to take.