



A House Divided (Part 1): Trouble in David's Family (2 Sam 17-18)

Notes: Week Nine

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

17:1-4 Absalom had unambiguously claimed Israel's throne for himself. Now the most pressing task became that of eliminating David, the only credible threat to Absalom's newfound power. This second objective was more challenging than the first, for David was a man of incredible military skill and resourcefulness. No enemy had ever succeeded in capturing or killing David, in spite of repeated efforts. Nevertheless, Ahithophel had devised a plan that maximized the potential for success in this undertaking.

As in his previous plan, Ahithophel's counsel for a military strategy against David was bold, simple, and likely to succeed. It incorporated three hallmarks of classic military strategy: use of overwhelming force, the element of surprise, and a narrowly focused objective.

The first aspect of Ahithophel's plan was the use of overwhelming force: Absalom should assemble a force of "twelve thousand men" (v. [1](#)). David's forces probably consisted of no more than two thousand men and perhaps were considerably fewer in number than that (cf. [15:18](#)). Thus, Absalom would conservatively have at least five times as many men on the battlefield as David. The advantages of having such lopsided numerical superiority were considerable: first, it meant that Absalom's forces could sustain greater casualties than David's and still prevail. Second, it provided Absalom's forces with a great psychological advantage because David's forces would likely be struck "with terror" (v. [2](#)) when they saw the size of the enemy arrayed against them. Third, overwhelming numbers of troops increased the likelihood that "all the people with" David "will flee," choosing not to fight at all instead of going against such great numbers.

The second key aspect of Ahithophel's strategy was the element of surprise. Although military maneuvers normally were limited to daylight hours, Ahithophel counseled Absalom to strike immediately—"tonight" (v. [1](#)). By doing so, they could overtake David's forces while they were still "weary and weak" (v. [2](#)) from the hasty, disorganized flight from Jerusalem. Attacking David's forces during this moment of extreme vulnerability virtually assured success for Absalom's larger military force.

Finally, Ahithophel's plan contained a narrowly defined purpose. The sole objective of the entire maneuver was to kill one man, David. After that one objective was achieved, then "all the people"—mostly innocent victims affected by the coup because of their connection with David—could be returned to Israel "unharmful" and spared the anguish of having to live as refugees. Ahithophel's plan was brilliant, and Absalom seemed ready to act on it almost immediately.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 410-423.

[17:5–10](#) In an act that would have momentous implications for Absalom and his government, however, the new king decided to consult Hushai before proceeding. On the surface Absalom’s request seemed reasonable: Ahithophel and Hushai had both provided David with valuable advice, and now David’s son wished to determine the best possible plan of action (cf. [Prov 11:14](#); [15:22](#); [24:6](#)). Accordingly, he invited Hushai to critique Ahithophel’s proposal. If Hushai disagreed with Ahithophel, he was to offer an alternative.

Hushai’s words spoken in response to Absalom’s invitation are perhaps the most significant ones uttered by a counselor in the history of united Israel’s monarchy. The speech is masterful in its construction and powerful in its effect: it simultaneously discredits Ahithophel, undermines Absalom’s confidence, magnifies the king’s worst fears, and buys David precious time to escape and regroup. In the end it lays the foundation for David’s return to Jerusalem.

Hushai’s first goal in his reply to the king was to debunk Ahithophel’s sage counsel. Having given the general opinion that it was “not good” (v. [7](#)), he proceeded to repudiate with conviction the essential presuppositions on which Ahithophel’s plan rested. Hushai implicitly accused Ahithophel of misjudging David and the armed forces accompanying him: these men were not “weary and weak” ([17:2](#))—they were “fighters, and as fierce as a wild bear robbed of her cubs” (v. [8](#)).

Hushai also faulted Ahithophel’s belief that the element of surprise could be used against David. Since David was “an experienced fighter,” he practiced battlefield techniques that essentially eliminated the possibility of being caught off guard. For instance, David did “not spend the night with the troops”; instead, he might hide “in a cave” (cf. [1 Sam 22:1](#); [24:3](#); [2 Sam 23:13](#))—and there were many of them around the north end of the Dead Sea (v. [9](#)).

Of course, this also meant that Ahithophel’s suggestion that the military objective be limited to killing only David was flawed. In their vain search for David, Absalom’s forces might easily blunder into a trap David had set for them, thus permitting David’s forces to attack first. If that happened, then the entire psychological advantage Ahithophel’s plan counted on would swing over to David’s side. False reports spread by panicky soldiers would get out, indicating that “there has been a slaughter among the troops who follow Absalom.” When that happened, “even the bravest soldier, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will melt with fear” (v. [10](#)). Absalom would lose control of his military forces, and the coup would fail.

[17:11–14](#) As an alternative to Ahithophel’s proposal, Hushai offered a much more massive plan. Instead of using a relatively small strike force such as Ahithophel’s plan called for, the king should muster “all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba,” creating a force “as numerous as the sand on the seashore.” Instead of trying to kill only David, all David’s forces should be pursued until not “any of his men will be left alive” (v. [12](#)). Furthermore, since the attack would be delayed, the geographic scope must be widened: Absalom’s forces would thus be free to attack David “wherever he may be found.” Instead of a single, swift raid on David such as Ahithophel envisioned, Hushai envisioned a protracted struggle that might even involve besieging a city. In the case of a siege, however—even a protracted one—Absalom’s forces would ultimately prevail.

After hearing Hushai’s ponderous, heavy-handed proposal, “Absalom and all the men of Israel” (v. [15](#)) miraculously concluded that it was superior to Ahithophel’s. Absalom’s decision was indeed the result of divine intervention, for Yahweh “had commanded [[Hb.](#), *šiwwâ*; NIV, “determined”] to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom” (v. [14](#); cf. [Job 5:12](#); [Prov 21:30](#); [Isa 8:10](#); [29:14](#); [1 Cor 1:19](#)). The Lord’s action was predictable, for by rebelling against his father Absalom had committed a sin unto death (cf. [Lev 20:11](#)). The Lord, the judge of all the earth, would enforce his laws, and no human could succeed in deflecting the divine purposes. Even the greatest possible

assemblage of wisdom, political power, and military might could not derail the performance of God's will.

[17:15–16](#) By frustrating Ahithophel's counsel, Hushai had accomplished the first mandate Israel's king-in-exile had given him ([15:34](#)). To fulfill his royal mission, however, Hushai had to perform one more task—convey to David the intimate details of Absalom's plan of action.

Without hesitation, Hushai sought out “Zadok and Abiathar” (v. [15](#)), David's Aaronic priests, and told them what both he and “Ahithophel” had “advised Absalom and the elders of Israel to do.” Accompanying this information was an urgent plan of action.

Hushai's strategy for David was based on the assumption that Absalom might yet be persuaded to follow Ahithophel's plan. If an attack force was actually sent out against David at sunset, then the king and his followers would have to move from their present location immediately.

[17:17–20](#) In order to convey this vital information to David without arousing suspicion, Zadok and Abiathar entrusted the message to “a servant girl” (v. [17](#)), who was to pass the information outside the city to the priests' sons “Jonathan and Ahimaaz.” Jonathan and Ahimaaz were hiding out “at En Rogel,” the site of a spring or well in the Kidron Valley less than a quarter of a mile from Jerusalem. Apparently the servant girl used the chore of fetching water as a pretext for going to meet the priests' sons there.

Unfortunately, “a young man saw” (v. [18](#)) Jonathan and Ahimaaz at En Rogel as they were receiving the information from the servant girl and immediately returned to Jerusalem “and told Absalom.” Jonathan and Ahimaaz realized that both their lives and their mission were now gravely threatened, and so “the two of them left quickly and went to the house of a man in Bahurim,” just over a mile south of Jerusalem. This unnamed citizen of Bahurim was a supporter of David's cause and must have been at least moderately wealthy, for he had a house with a courtyard and a private well. Acting without hesitation to save Jonathan's and Ahimaaz's lives, he permitted them to hide in his well. Then, in order to conceal the existence of their well, his wife covered it and “scattered grain over it.”

Later that same day the woman was questioned about the whereabouts of “Ahimaaz and Jonathan.” Implicitly admitting she had encountered David's allies, she nevertheless indicated that they were not on the premises. Instead, they had “crossed over the reservoir of the water [NIV, “brook”],” suggesting the men had gone south. The omission of any mention of the woman's husband during this encounter suggests that he had deliberately stayed away to avoid the appearance of any irregularity at the house.

Both the man and the woman deliberately misled the would-be assassins of Jonathan and Ahimaaz, yet the writer does not fault the couple for this action. As in previous instances where deceptions were employed to save innocent human life (cf. [1 Sam 19:13–17](#); [20:6, 28–29](#)), neither the letter nor spirit of the Torah were violated (cf. n. at [1 Sam 20:5](#)). To the contrary, the writer implies that when confronted with the horns of this ethical dilemma, the couple chose the least undesirable alternative. As a result, David and his entire entourage escaped Absalom's forces.

[17:21–22](#) Jonathan and Ahimaaz finally arrived at David's camp. Their advice was designed to prepare David and his group for the worst-case scenario, that of an imminent predawn lightning raid of the type suggested by Ahithophel (cf. [17:1–3](#)).

David and his group had spent the entire day making a headlong twenty-mile journey from Jerusalem to the Jordan River. They were exhausted and would have relished a peaceful night's rest. But on this night, “David and all the people with him” (v. [22](#)) denied themselves sleep in order to attempt a dangerous trek through rushing waters of the Jordan in almost total darkness. In spite of the inherent

perils, “by daybreak no one was left who had not crossed the Jordan.” The Lord’s hand of protection and blessing had once again wrapped itself around David.

[17:23](#) As night fell on Jerusalem and the troops were still with the king in the city, Ahithophel realized that his military counsel had been snubbed and that Absalom had lost the only good opportunity he would ever have to destroy David. Along with this, he realized that his own hope of retaining the preeminent position of influence and honor among the counselors in the royal court had also disappeared.

More than that, Ahithophel knew that when David returned to Jerusalem— and return he surely would— he himself would be executed as a traitor. Therefore after careful thought Israel’s wisest man made the decision to end his own life.

Ahithophel’s decision to control the circumstances of his own death was a calculated one. The writer makes no explicit judgments concerning its moral rightness or wrongness; but this is not surprising, for the text was not written as a treatise on the ethics of suicide.

Nevertheless, the detailed description of Ahithophel’s death, preceded as it is by the emphasis on his precocious wisdom (cf. [15:31](#); [16:23](#)), does enhance the writer’s critique of human wisdom. Earlier, the counsel of the wise man Shimeah (cf. [13:3–5](#)) was shown to bring humiliation to the royal family and death to an heir of the king; here an even wiser man’s wisdom had led to an inglorious and premature death that deprived one of Israel’s best families of its most honored member. Without descending to the level of the explicit, the writer conveys the truth that human wisdom untempered by divine revelation produces results that are neither desirable nor productive.

In this entire event the writer has taken great care to describe how King Absalom determined his course of action—like the kings of other nations, he sought the advice of wise men. In so doing he created a strong contrast with his father. At every crux in his life, David sought the word of the Lord, either through an Aaronic priest ([1 Sam 23:1–6](#); [2 Sam 5:19, 23](#)) or a prophet ([7:3–17](#)). Absalom’s pursuit of and compliance with human counsel brought about the hasty end of his regime. David’s pursuit of and obedience to divine revelation brought him only success and dynastic blessings. By providing contrasting narrative portraits of these two Davidic kings, the author writes a prescription for the success of all future leaders in Israel: seek the word of the Lord through its authorized mediators and obey it.

[17:24–26](#) Now in exile east of the Jordan, “David went to Mahanaim” (v. [24](#)), the walled city by the Jabbok River from which Ish-Bosheth had previously governed Israel. At this point David’s life presages the profound tragedy of sixth-century B.C. Judah. They, too, would be driven into exile eastward from the Promised Land, with their Davidic king forced to live in the capital city of an enemy (cf. [2 Kgs 24:15](#)).

Once Absalom had mustered his massive array of troops, he too “crossed the Jordan with all the men of Israel.” Absalom’s forces were under the command of Amasa (v. [25](#)), David’s nephew and a cousin to David’s general Joab. Amasa’s father was “Ithra [NIV, “Jether”; cf. [1 Chr 2:17](#)], an Israelite [Ishmaelite? cf. [1 Chr 2:17](#)].” This massive force camped north of Mahanaim “in the land of Gilead” (v. [26](#)). This region included the city of Jabesh Gilead, the city that had expressed such great appreciation for the Saulide dynasty earlier (cf. [1 Sam 31:11–13](#)). Their toleration of the anti-Davidic forces in their region suggests that they, too, were working for David’s defeat, in spite of his previous efforts to win their support (cf. [2:4–7](#)).

[17:27–29](#) Though many Israelites east of the Jordan supported the revolt against David, the king had his key supporters in the area as well. Each of the individuals mentioned here was wealthy and perhaps owed the preservation of their wealth to David’s successful military campaigns in and around the region of Rabbah (cf. [8:2](#), [12](#); [10:6–19](#)). Furthermore, Makir may have been appreciative of David’s loyal support for Mephibosheth, an individual for whom he himself had previously provided (cf. [9:4](#)).

Collectively, these three individuals provided an impressive supply of matériel to meet the practical needs of David’s government-in-exile. No doubt the group had left such items as bedding and pottery behind in Jerusalem, due to the impracticality of transporting them. But now that the group was settling down in Mahanaim, such provisions were needed. Equipped with these mundane but necessary items the royal party could reestablish some reasonable sense of domestic life.

Shobi, Makir, and Barzillai also provided David’s group with a generous supply of foodstuffs. This almost-prodigious provision in David’s behalf must have seemed akin to the Lord’s provision of manna in the wilderness wanderings of earlier Israelites. Perhaps this gift of food was the inspiration for David’s immortal psalmodic expression: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” ([Ps 23:5](#)).

(10) David’s Forces Quell Absalom’s Revolt [18:1–19:8](#)

[18:1–3](#) As life stabilized for David in Mahanaim, he was able to exercise his administrative and military skills to respond to Absalom’s challenge. His first priority was that of organizing a military force that could mount a credible attack on Absalom’s troops. David knew the advantages inherent in striking first—being able to choose the time and site of the conflict—and so he acted quickly.

Accordingly, David organized a five-tiered army. At the lowest level were the basic troops; just above them David appointed “commanders of hundreds” and over them “commanders of thousands” (v. [1](#)). Over these lower- and intermediate-level officers David appointed three commanding officers, each with equal authority: Joab, Joab’s brother Abishai (v. [2](#)), and Ittai the Gittite. At the highest level of authority was David himself.

As the supreme commanding officer, David fully intended to “march out” with his troops. However, the soldiers rejected this aspect of David’s plan as far too risky. As the men told the king, David could best provide “support” for his troops “from the city” (v. [3](#)). Then if the attack faltered, heavy casualties were sustained, and David’s men were “forced to flee” (v. [3](#)), the cause would go on. Even if they sustained as much as fifty-percent casualty rates, David would still “have ten thousand” more soldiers like them who could continue the struggle.

[18:4–5](#) David recognized the wisdom of the men’s advice. In an uncharacteristic display of royal deference, the king agreed to “do whatever seems best” to (v. [4](#)) his administrative inferiors. Passively the king reviewed his army as they proceeded to engage the enemy.

Though David was to remain in Mahanaim, he exercised his prerogative as supreme commander by ordering his troop commanders to “be gentle with the young man Absalom” (v. [5](#)). The order was not issued in the privacy of the royal residence but publicly so that “all the troops heard” what David said.

[18:6–8](#) The conflict took place a few miles northwest of Mahanaim “in the forest of Ephraim.” By choosing a forest as the battlefield, David hoped to minimize the value of Absalom’s numerical advantage. The strategy paid off handsomely. Under the capable leadership of Joab, Abishai, and Ittai, David’s men fought well in the forest.

One reason for David's success was that his three commanders fragmented the opposition. By deploying their separate units in different areas, they spread Absalom's troops "over the whole countryside" (v. [8](#)), thus preventing them from making a united stand. David's forces also used the terrain to maximum advantage.

[18:9–10](#) During the course of the battle on that day, "Absalom began crying out in the presence of David's men" (v. [9](#): NIV, "happened to meet David's men") in the forest. The reason for the commotion was most remarkable: while riding through the forest "under the thick branches of a large oak, Absalom's head got caught in the tree," probably because his hair (cf. [14:26](#)) had become entangled in the branches. In an effort to avoid having his scalp torn off, he grabbed onto the tree limb and began calling out for help. In the meantime, "the mule he was riding kept on going," with the result that he was left dangling helplessly "between the sky and the earth" [NIV, "in midair"]. Hearing the commotion, "one of the men" (v. [10](#)) in service to David saw the incredible spectacle and immediately reported it to Joab.

The words used by the soldier to report Absalom's condition are of great theological and thematic significance: "Absalom was hanging [Hb., *tālûy*] in an oak tree." The word translated "hanging" here is used only once in the Torah ([Deut 21:23](#)) to declare that "anyone who is *hung* [*tālûy*] on a tree is under God's curse." Absalom had rebelled against divine law by rebelling against his father (cf. [Exod 20:12](#); [Deut 5:16](#); [21:18–21](#)) and sleeping with members of David's harem ([Lev 20:11](#)). Absalom had the massive armies of Israel fighting to protect him, and he was personally equipped with a fast means of escape not afforded other soldiers—a mule. Nevertheless, in spite of these seemingly insurmountable advantages, Absalom could not escape God's judgment. The Lord had declared in the Torah that one who dishonored his father was cursed ([Deut 27:16](#)) and likewise that one who slept with his father's wife was cursed ([Deut 27:20](#))—Absalom, of course, had done both. Although no army had been able to catch Absalom and punish him, God himself had sent a curse against him that simultaneously caught and punished the rebel. The fearful judgments of the Torah had proven credible: the Lord had upheld his law.

[18:11–13](#) When Joab learned of Absalom's predicament and that the king's son was still alive, he became angry. Through Joab's own words the narrator also reveals that David's nephew/general himself was a rebel against the king. Although David had ordered his commanders to be gentle with Absalom (v. [5](#)), Joab had promised a reward of "ten shekels of silver [approx. four ounces] and a warrior's belt" to anyone who killed the king's son—a reward that could only have come from one determined to disobey the king in this matter. Apparently Joab had decided that the only way to end the civil war was to kill Absalom.

In spite of the reward Joab had posted, the soldier refused to "lift [his] hand against the king's son" (v. [12](#)) even if it were multiplied a hundred times, for his respect for David's order prevailed. Besides, when David discovered who had done it—"and nothing is hidden from the king" (v. [13](#))—his life would be "in jeopardy." The soldier could not trust Joab to cover for him in the matter; anyone who would betray his king would surely betray a nameless underling.

[18:14–15](#) Joab, irritated and unfazed by the soldier's warnings, impatiently left the underling behind and went in pursuit of Absalom. For the encounter he took "three javelins in his hand" (v. [14](#)) and a contingent of "ten ... armor-bearers" (v. [15](#)). The group arrived at the oak tree and found the king's son exactly as the soldier had described. Without hesitation Joab took the lead in resolving the matter, thrusting all three javelins "into Absalom's heart." The armor-bearers followed the lead of their commander and likewise "struck" Absalom "and killed him."

[18:16–17](#) Now that Absalom was dead, the uprising was dead. Accordingly, “Joab sounded” the notes “on the shophar” [NIV, “trumpet”], signifying cessation of military activity. In this matter Joab had followed Ahithophel’s logic (cf. [17:2–3](#)), believing that the only one who had to be destroyed was the rival to the throne.

In accordance with Torah requirements (cf. [Deut 21:23](#)), the rebellious son’s mangled corpse was removed from the tree before nightfall. His body was then buried in a contemptuous manner by being thrown “into a big pit in the forest” (v. [17](#)) and covered with a large heap of rocks. This form of burial denied Absalom the honor of being laid to rest in the family tomb. The act was also laden with symbolic value: first, it caused Absalom to be excluded from the Promised Land, since the burial site was east of the Jordan River. Absalom’s rebellion had caused King David to remain outside the Promised Land for a time; now the rebellion would cause King Absalom to remain outside the Promised Land forever. Second, it identified Absalom with Achan (cf. [Josh 7:26](#)), an Israelite whose earlier rebellion against the Lord’s word had brought trouble to Israel; third, it identified him with the Canaanite king of Ai (cf. [Josh 8:29](#)), implying that King Absalom, like this previous king, was an enemy to the Lord’s people. Finally, it fulfilled the Torah’s demand that a rebellious son be stoned ([Deut 21:21](#)).

Word spread quickly among Absalom’s troops that their king was dead. Since their hopes for Absalom perished with his death, they had no reason to continue the struggle against David. Accordingly, “all the Israelites” who had supported Absalom “fled to their homes” while David’s forces were preoccupied with the task of disposing of Absalom.

[18:18](#) Ironically, even as a monument of stone memorialized Absalom’s sterile kingship, so also “a monument” (v. [18](#)) of stone memorialized his sterile fatherhood. The former was made by David’s loyalists following the death of David’s son; the latter was constructed by Absalom himself following the death of his three sons (cf. [14:27](#)). “In the King’s Valley,” probably located just outside the city walls of Jerusalem, Absalom had “taken a pillar, ... erected it,” and “named” it “after himself.”

[18:19–23](#) Soon after Absalom died and Joab had declared an end to the hostilities, “Ahimaaz son of Zadok” (v. [19](#)) requested permission to carry the battle news to the king. Ahimaaz’s previous efforts as a messenger had allowed David to flee safely into exile ([17:17–22](#)); now the young man wished to deliver the welcome news that the king could safely return from exile.

However, Joab refused to grant Ahimaaz permission to carry the news of Absalom’s death back to David. The refusal was not based on a lack of confidence in Ahimaaz’s ability—in fact, he would gladly let him “take the news another time” (v. [20](#)). Instead, it was based on Joab’s memories of David’s treatment of previous messengers who had announced the deaths of David’s adversaries. David killed those who had brought news of both Saul’s and Ish-Bosheth’s deaths (cf. [1:4–16](#); [4:8–12](#)), and Joab feared he would do the same to Ahimaaz.

To avoid risking the life of Ahimaaz, who was valued as a loyal servant and an Aaronic priest, Joab sent a non-Israelite—“a Cushite” (v. [21](#)), who perhaps was Joab’s slave—to “go tell the king.” As a foreigner, the Cushite was most likely unaware of David’s past history and probably felt honored to have been chosen to share the news of a battlefield victory with the king. Accordingly, he “bowed down before Joab and ran off.”

Ahimaaz, more determined than ever to deliver the momentous news to David, approached Joab a second time with his request. He fully intended to be the first to arrive in Mahanaim, yet he only asked Joab for permission to “run behind the Cushite.” Joab was bewildered by Ahimaaz’s enthusiasm for the task and reminded the priest that he was not bearing “any news that will bring ... a reward.” Undaunted, Ahimaaz restated his desire “to run” (v. [23](#)) to the king “come what may.” Seeing that Ahimaaz would

not be dissuaded and believing that he would arrive only after David had expended his emotions against the Cushite, Joab gave him leave.

Once on his way, Ahimaaz made his journey to Mahanaim “by way of the plain”—that is, by running over the relatively flat terrain paralleling the Jordan River—instead of climbing up and down over the rugged forested hills as the Cushite was doing. This less arduous path, though longer, permitted Ahimaaz to arrive at Mahanaim before “the Cushite.”

[18:24–27](#) Meanwhile, David was anxiously awaiting word on the outcome of the battle. Assisting him in his vigil was a “watchman.” By standing atop the fortified entrance of the city set on a hill, the watchman had a commanding view of all roads in the region.

In the distance the watchman “saw a man running alone” toward the city and “reported it” (v. [25](#)) to David. The king, himself a veteran of countless battles, instantly interpreted this observation for what it was—evidence of a victory for his forces. After all, if his forces had been defeated in battle, they would have made a headlong retreat to Mahanaim in massive numbers.

During the anxious moments when the runner was coming “closer and closer,” “another man running alone” (v. [26](#)) was also spotted. This observation, combined with the conclusion that the first man “runs like Ahimaaz son of Zadok” (v. [27](#)), merely confirmed David’s theory and added to his expectations of hearing “good news.”

[18:28–33](#) Soon Ahimaaz reached Mahanaim’s city gate. But even before he was properly situated in front of the king, Ahimaaz provided David with a one-word summary of the battle’s outcome: “Peace” (v. [28](#); NIV, “All is well”). After he arrived and appropriately “bowed down before the king with his face to the ground,” he praised the Lord and confirmed that God had “delivered up the men who lifted their hands against ... the king.”

This news simultaneously brought relief and concern to David. Ignoring the good aspects of the news in hopes of relieving his worst fears, the king plied Ahimaaz with the only question that mattered to him: “Is the young man Absalom safe?” (v. [29](#)). Ahimaaz took Joab’s previous warnings (cf. vv. [20](#), [22](#)) to heart and discreetly avoided telling David the truth. Although he knew the king’s son was dead (v. [20](#)), he deceptively revealed only that he had observed “great confusion” but did not “know what it was.”

Ahimaaz’s failure to give David a definitive answer only added to the king’s anxiety. With growing concern, the king ordered the young priest to “stand aside and wait” until “the Cushite arrived” (v. [31](#)) and could be interrogated. The Cushite confirmed Ahimaaz’s report of “the good news” that the Lord had delivered David “from all who rose up against” him. The only good news that the king wanted to hear, however, was that “the young man Absalom” was “safe” (v. [32](#)).

Tactfully the Cushite revealed the truth concerning Absalom’s condition. He did so without ever directly stating that Absalom had died—much less that he had been executed by David’s highest-ranking military officer. Instead, it was stated in the form of a gentle wish that “all who rise up to harm” David “be like that young man.”

The delicate words smashed into the king’s consciousness like a sledge hammer, and he “began to tremble violently” (v. [33](#) [[19:1](#), MT]; NIV, “was shaken”). Seeking isolation from others, David immediately “went up to the room over the gateway,” weeping and crying out to his dead son as he went. In this location—ironically situated “between the sky and the earth” (v. [9](#)), the same position in which Absalom had died—David declared to his beloved son his wish to have “died instead of” him.