

## Chapter Eleven

### 2 Samuel 15.1–37

# The Rebellion of Absalom

## Introduction

It is striking how often adversity brings out the best in a person. As long as circumstances are essentially easy, it is possible to coast. It is only when things go wrong that it becomes necessary to dig deep and to tap reserves of character and strength that might not otherwise have been drawn upon at all.

The reconciliation between David and Absalom proves to have been superficial. The vague chronological reference in verse 1 suggests that these events followed quite swiftly on the close of the previous episode. It will be another four years (verse 7) before Absalom is sufficiently confident of his powerbase to embark on rebellion outright; but he begins to build that powerbase without delay. Perhaps he is encouraged in his designs by his father's languor. David has been a shadow of his former self since Nathan denounced him in chapter 12. Once Absalom rebels however something of the old David (which is to say, the young David) returns. By the end of this episode, David is once again exercising the faith and generosity which had previously characterised him.

The episode comprises five scenes. In the first, Absalom deliberately adopts some of the trappings of kingship and sets out to woo support among the Israelites. In the second, he visits Hebron, ostensibly to worship the Lord, but in reality to launch an uprising. In the third, the rebellion gathers momentum. In the fourth (easily the longest), events are described in some detail as David surprisingly opts to abandon his capital city. In the final scene, the king begins his counter-attack, sending an ally back to Jerusalem as a spy.

## Scene One (verses 1-6): Absalom steals the hearts of the people of Israel

*After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run ahead of him. 2 Absalom used to rise early*

*and stand beside the road into the gate; and when anyone brought a suit before the king for judgement, Absalom would call out and say, 'From what city are you?' When the person said, 'Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel', 3 Absalom would say, 'See, your claims are good and right; but there is no one deputed by the king to hear you.' 4 Absalom said moreover, 'If only I were judge in the land! Then all who had a suit or cause might come to me, and I would give them justice.' 5 Whenever people came near to do obeisance to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of them, and kiss them. 6 Thus Absalom did to every Israelite who came to the king for judgement; so Absalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel.*

The wise woman of Tekoa credited David (14.20) with having the wisdom to know 'all things that are on the earth' (or more probably, 'everything taking place in the land'). But either David was oblivious to what Absalom was up to or he foolishly chose to turn a blind eye to it.

Absalom acquires a chariot and horses and men to run before him, heralding his presence. It is unmistakably the act of a man who would be king (see 1 Kings 1.5) – and a king like one from the neighbouring nations at that (see 1.6; 8.3-4; Exodus 14.7-29).

But Absalom was capable of the subtle manœuvre as well as the blatant one. However vain he may have been, he was not a lazy man. He is as energetic as his father is lethargic. Day after day, in pursuit of his goal, he rose early and made his way to the city gate in order to be in the place where legal disputes were traditionally heard, at the time it was conventional to hear them (see Ruth 4.1-11; Jeremiah 21.12).

It was not simply in succession to 'the judges' that Israelite kings were appointed, but in order to put right a judicial system which had gone wrong (see 1 Samuel 8.1-2). David at his best dispensed justice and equity in Israel. And if Absalom is to become king, he must first convince the people that he can fulfil the judicial function more effectively than his father. So he loiters at the place of justice and curries favour among those who seek the king's intervention there. Either David has become slow and ineffective at hearing the cases which are brought to him (which would be entirely consistent with the impression of indolence he gives at this stage of his reign) or Absalom is able to create the impression that it is so and to exaggerate the problems. He assures supplicants that their cases are strong (which is easy enough to do if judgment has only to be dispensed in theory not practice). It is always easier to be the party of opposition than the

party of government. ‘Oh, if only I were judge’, he sighs. ‘I wouldn’t keep people waiting like my father. I’d make sure people had prompt hearings – and favourable ones’. It is not necessary for him to declare openly his desire to be king. Everyone knows that it is the king’s job to exercise justice.

So the narrator says ‘Absalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel’. The surprise here is not that Absalom succeeded in his objective, but that David lost people’s hearts so easily. The expression surely means that Absalom won not just the affection of the Israelites, but their political loyalty and commitment also. How did David alienate his subjects? Perhaps there was a widespread loss of public confidence in his leadership partly on account of what he did (in relation to Bathsheba and Uriah) and partly on account of what he failed to do (in relation to Amnon and then Absalom). Perhaps his sins of commission and of omission have undermined his credibility as the nation’s judge.

It may be that Absalom’s efforts were focused on the Israelites in the narrow, rather than the broad, sense of that word. Was he especially seeking to cultivate support among the northern tribes, who might be quick to feel disadvantaged by David’s administration of justice? David’s Judean origins possibly made his support precarious among the former subjects of Ishbaal (2 Samuel 2-4) so that these were only too eager to transfer their allegiance to Absalom (especially given his political affiliation to Geshur). Interestingly, the wise woman of Tekoa, who succeeded in getting David’s ear readily enough when she brought her case to be heard by him, came from the south.

In a sense of course Absalom had already usurped David’s role as judge when he took matters into his own hands and killed Amnon for what he had done to Tamar. But that act of usurpation was isolated and personal; now he is usurping his father’s role systematically and publicly. There remains but one step and that is for him to usurp his father’s throne.

### **Scene Two (verses 7-9): Absalom proposes to worship the Lord in Hebron**

*7 At the end of four years Absalom said to the king, ‘Please let me go to Hebron and pay the vow that I have made to the Lord. 8 For your servant made a vow while I lived at Geshur in Aram: If the Lord will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will worship the Lord in Hebron.’ 9 The king said to him, ‘Go in peace.’ So he got up, and went to Hebron.*

Absalom's request – or rather David's apparent lack of unease about it – is intriguing for two reasons. First there is the timing. On any reading of verse 7 (it is impossible to be certain about the chronology because the Hebrew manuscript tradition is confusing), it is clear in the light of 14.28 that it took Absalom an inordinately long time to get round to honouring a vow he made in Geshur. He has been back in Jerusalem at least two years and probably six. One possibility is that it is now seven years since he killed his brother (taking verse 7 to mean 'four years after he returned from Geshur' and adding the three years he spent in exile there, 13.38). It may be that that was a requisite period of penance for a crime such as Absalom's and that the worship to which he refers is the sacrifice which will expiate his transgression. Yet it seems not to have occurred to David to question his son's motivation or to ask, 'Why now?'

Absalom's request is intriguing secondly because he specifies that he wishes to go to worship the Lord in Hebron. At least twice already in this story an occasion to worship the Lord has been used as a cover for some ulterior purpose. When Samuel first went to Bethlehem (in 1 Samuel 16.1-5) to anoint David, his fear of Saul was such that the Lord encouraged his prophet to pretend that the purpose of his journey was to make a sacrifice. When David himself fled from Saul's presence, Jonathan claimed that his friend was absent from the king's table only because he had returned to his home town to join his family in offering a sacrifice. So David can hardly be unaware of the risk that Absalom's request is sinister. Moreover there is no evidence that Hebron was regarded as a particularly holy place or served as a traditional centre of worship in Israel. What better place for worship than Jerusalem, where the ark of the Lord was stationed? Conversely Hebron was Absalom's birthplace and the place where David himself had first been acclaimed as king. It was therefore an obvious power base for Absalom, especially if there was any lingering sense of betrayal by David among its citizens after he moved his capital city to Jerusalem. Yet it seems not to have occurred to David to ask, 'Why Hebron?'

David's complete lack of suspicion is all the more surprising given that Absalom had deceived his father with a similar, ostensibly innocent, request in the run up to Amnon's murder. If David had any qualms about these developments there is no hint of it in the text. Rather he dismissed his son in peace and Absalom went at once to Hebron.

It transpires that these were the last words exchanged between father and son. Absalom speaks repeatedly of the Lord but with deceitful intent. David speaks of peace but with almost willful naivety.

**Scene Three (verses 10-12): Absalom's conspiracy grows in strength**

*10 But Absalom sent secret messengers throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, 'As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then shout: Absalom has become king at Hebron!'*

*11 Two hundred men from Jerusalem went with Absalom; they were invited guests, and they went in their innocence, knowing nothing of the matter. 12 While Absalom was offering the sacrifices, he sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counsellor, from his city Giloh. The conspiracy grew in strength, and the people with Absalom kept increasing.*

Hebron may provide a convenient platform for Absalom's rebellion in the short-term. But he has been building support 'throughout all the tribes of Israel' for several years and now sends secret messengers to his supporters to tell them to await the proclamation of his kingdom. (On the use of the trumpet to herald a new king, compare 1 Kings 1.34, 39, 2 Kings 9.13, 11.14.) It must have been a considerable logistical feat to dispatch sufficient messengers. This was a substantial conspiracy.

Meanwhile Absalom takes with him two hundred men from Jerusalem – all apparently innocent of his intentions and as unsuspecting as David. If the king has authorised the expedition, after all, what concern can there be?

From Hebron Absalom sends for a key recruit to his cause. Ahithophel is described as 'David's counsellor'. He was apparently a principal member of his team (although this is the first time he has been mentioned and his name does not feature in the list of officers in chapter 8.16-18). He may have been grandfather to Bathsheba, since he had a son by the name of Eliam (included in the list of the Thirty of David's most valiant warriors, 23.34), which was also the name of her father (11.3). It could be that his defection to Absalom reflects a sense of betrayal by David and a lingering loyalty to Uriah and resentment over the treatment of his granddaughter.

At some point the trumpets were presumably duly sounded. At any rate the conspiracy became a matter of public knowledge, so that it became possible to speak of it growing and of people flocking to join it. What happened to the two hundred innocent participants in Absalom's act of 'worship' is not clear.

**Scene Four (verses 13-31): David abandons Jerusalem**

*13 A messenger came to David, saying, 'The hearts of the Israelites have gone after Absalom.' 14 Then David said to all his officials who were with him at Jerusalem, 'Get up!*

*Let us flee, or there will be no escape for us from Absalom. Hurry, or he will soon overtake us, and bring disaster down upon us, and attack the city with the edge of the sword.’ 15 The king’s officials said to the king, ‘Your servants are ready to do whatever our lord the king decides.’ 16 So the king left, followed by all his household, except ten concubines whom he left behind to look after the house. 17 The king left, followed by all the people; and they stopped at the last house. 18 All his officials passed by him; and all the Cherethites, and all the Pelethites, and all the six hundred Gittites who had followed him from Gath, passed on before the king.*

*19 Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, ‘Why are you also coming with us? Go back, and stay with the king; for you are a foreigner, and also an exile from your home. 20 You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander about with us, while I go wherever I can? Go back, and take your kinsfolk with you; and may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you.’ 21 But Ittai answered the king, ‘As the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be.’ 22 David said to Ittai, ‘Go then, march on.’ So Ittai the Gittite marched on, with all his men and all the little ones who were with him. 23 The whole country wept aloud as all the people passed by; the king crossed the Wadi Kidron, and all the people moved on towards the wilderness.*

*24 Abiathar came up, and Zadok also, with all the Levites, carrying the ark of the covenant of God. They set down the ark of God, until the people had all passed out of the city. 25 Then the king said to Zadok, ‘Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favour in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and the place where it remains. 26 But if he says, “I take no pleasure in you”, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him.’ 27 The king also said to the priest Zadok, ‘Look, go back to the city in peace, you and Abiathar, with your two sons, Ahimaaz your son, and Jonathan son of Abiathar. 28 See, I will wait at the fords of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me.’ 29 So Zadok and Abiathar carried the ark of God back to Jerusalem, and they remained there.*

*30 But David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, with his head covered and walking barefoot; and all the people who were with him covered their heads and went up, weeping as they went. 31 David was told that Ahithophel was among the conspirators with Absalom. And David said, 'O Lord, I pray you, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness.'*

News of the conspiracy reaches David in Jerusalem. In verse 6 the reader was told that Absalom was stealing the hearts of the people of Israel. Now a messenger tells David, 'the hearts of the Israelites have gone after Absalom' (verse 13).

The king's response is urgent. 'Quick!', he calls, 'we must flee'. His instinct is to revert to the pattern of flight he knew under Saul. Why does he not plan to fight in defence of Jerusalem and the throne? Is he really so fearful and so pessimistic about his chances of victory? Does he not still have the upper hand – possession of the capital city (which, until David took it was considered almost impregnable, compare 5.6), the loyalty of a large and experienced army, and ample wealth and resources?

But there is another possibility. It may be that what he wants to avoid is not defeat but a bloody conflict in Jerusalem. It may be that his response is not one of panic and fear, but one of political pragmatism or even of spiritual courage. Perhaps he wants to spare the city the trauma of battle and the 'collateral damage' that such conflicts inevitably entail. Perhaps, just as David had earlier refused to snatch at the crown (2.1-4), he now refuses to cling to it.

Certainly no-one advises against the course of action the king suggests. His officers assure him of their loyal support. So David evacuates, together with all his household; that is, all except for ten concubines who are left 'to look after the house' – a decision he would later come to regret (16.20-22). Why does the house need 'looking after'? And if this piece of property were deemed worthy of care, how on earth did David imagine ten females associated with himself would be safe to provide it? Did he really not foresee their fate? Or were they in fact left as some sort of lightening conductor to 'earth' the wrath of God prophesied by Nathan in 12.11-12. If there was a degree of calculation about David's decision to leave Jerusalem, it is likely there was also a degree of calculation about his decision to abandon his concubines to their fate.

So the king leads his officials into exile. At the edge of the city, at the last house, David stops and the procession marches past him,

including the Pelethites and the Cherethites (see 8.18) and six hundred 'Gittites who had followed him from Gath'. Presumably the latter are his most longstanding troops, who were with him when he sought refuge with King Achish, and thus followed him first into Gath in 1 Samuel 27.1-4 and then out again afterwards as implied by 1 Samuel 30.9; see also 2 Samuel 6.11).

Then the king speaks to Ittai, leader of the Gittites. This is the first in a series of five encounters David has as he leaves Jerusalem which will in due course be balanced by a series of four on his return (in 2 Samuel 19). After Ittai, Abiathar and Zadok together (15.24-29), then Hushai (15.32-37), Ziba (16.1-4) and Shimei (16.5-8) will encounter the king as he departs; the last two of these (19.16-23), plus Mephibosheth (19.24-30) and Barzillai (19.31-40) will do so on his return.

It is no coincidence that it is in speaking with one of his oldest allies that David first recovers his old tone of faith and trust in God. As Ittai marches past, David urges him to turn back and remain in the city. 'After all', he says, 'you owe me nothing. You're a foreigner who joined my ranks only yesterday'. He gives Ittai every opportunity to withdraw with honour. In fact, if the six hundred men led by Ittai are indeed the six hundred referred to in 1 Samuel 27.1-4, then he has been with David something over 20 years – certainly from a time before Absalom was even born (3.2). At the climax of this generous invitation to Ittai, David prays that the Lord might show the Gittite his steadfast love and faithfulness. What he seeks for Ittai is what he most needs himself. It is a piety David has not shown since before his affair with Bathsheba.

Presumably to help Ittai feel free to choose to stay in Jerusalem, David goes as far in verse 19 as to call Absalom 'the king'. The title is all the more startling because of the studied emphasis on David's kingship in the surrounding verses. Verse 15 is typical: 'The king's officials said to the king, "Your servants are ready to do whatever our lord the king decides"'. David may be ready to concede his crown to his son; but his faithful officials are not.

Ittai chooses to stay with David. (The Hebrew *'iti* means 'with me'.) He promises solemnly, with an invocation of the Lord, that he (and his men and all the little ones with them, verse 22) will remain with David whatever the cost. His words are reminiscent of those of Ruth to Naomi in Ruth 1.16-17. Ittai is a man of war. He understands that there may be a cost. His commitment is 'for death or for life'. The pledge is not lightly made.

It is a symbolically highly charged moment when (in verse 23) David crosses the Wadi Kidron and the exodus begins to head out



towards the wilderness. At the sight, ‘the whole country wept aloud’. As David leaves Jerusalem in the company of his faithful followers but under threat, Christian readers are reminded of the journey made by Jesus with his disciples on the night before he died (see John 18.1).

Now a critical decision has to be made. Is the ark of God to go into exile with David or to remain in Jerusalem? Is it destined to cross not just the Wadi Kidron but the Jordan River out of Israel, as David will do in 17.22 (in a reversal of what had happened at the conquest in Joshua 3.14-17)? Abiathar and Zadok present themselves before David ‘with all the Levites’ (to whom this, in verse 24, is one of only two references in 1 and 2 Samuel; compare 1 Samuel 6.15, also in association with the ark). But the priests say nothing. Perhaps they dare not express a preference. Again David is first to speak. Addressing himself to Zadok, he again urges his followers to turn back. Again his words are full of trust in the providence of God. Perhaps, if he finds favour with the Lord, the Lord will restore him to Jerusalem and will enable him to see the ark in its rightful place once again. But if not, ‘Let him do to me what seems good to him’ he says. If in bringing the ark to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6, David was in danger of identifying the purpose and will of God with his own, then here in refusing to take the ark out of Jerusalem, he is correcting his mistake. Remarkably, David is able to distinguish between knowing that *God* is with him and having the *symbol* of God’s presence with him. He is also ready to run the risk that not all his opponents or supporters will be able to make that distinction. Some must surely have supposed that the one in possession not just of Jerusalem, but of the ark of God, was the one with divine legitimation.

There is no word of protest from the priests, nor any word of acceptance or sorrow. Instead David speaks again. He tells Zadok that he and Abiathar, together with their sons (also priests) are to go back to the city ‘in peace’. He then adds a commission. It isn’t immediately obvious that his words are an instruction to the priests to act covertly as spies on his behalf. The sequel in 17.15-21 however leaves no doubt at all that that is what is meant when he tells them that he will wait at the fords of the wilderness ‘until word comes from you to inform me’ (verse 28). Again this is more like the old David, who typically combined real faith with shrewd political acumen (see for example the two contrasting questions about fighting Goliath which are David’s very first words in this story, in 1 Samuel 17.26).

As the priests and the ark of God turn back, David continues his *Via Dolorosa*. He stands weeping on the Mount of Olives as a descendant (also rejected by the people, although the rightful king) would do under

difference circumstances many centuries later (see Luke 19.41). He walks barefoot, with his head covered. His followers also weep, with covered heads (see Ezekiel 24.17, 23). Then comes a bitter blow as David learns that Ahithophel is among the defectors. But he responds in a simple prayer that God might thwart any counsel Ahithophel offers Absalom and turn it 'into foolishness'. This is the first time David has been recorded in prayer since his response to Nathan's oracle in 2 Samuel 7.

### **Scene Five (verses 32-37): David sends Hushai the Archite back to Jerusalem**

*32 When David came to the summit, where God was worshipped, Hushai the Archite came to meet him with his coat torn and earth on his head. 33 David said to him, 'If you go on with me, you will be a burden to me. 34 But if you return to the city and say to Absalom, "I will be your servant, O king; as I have been your father's servant in time past, so now I will be your servant", then you will defeat for me the counsel of Ahithophel. 35 The priests Zadok and Abiathar will be with you there. So whatever you hear from the king's house, tell it to the priests Zadok and Abiathar. 36 Their two sons are with them there, Zadok's son Ahimaaz and Abiathar's son Jonathan; and by them you shall report to me everything you hear.' 37 So Hushai, David's friend, came into the city, just as Absalom was entering Jerusalem.*

David's prayer is effectively answered at once, although it will be some time before he knows it. As he reaches the summit, a high place where God is worshipped, he meets another of his faithful followers. Hushai the Archite is in mourning, with his coat torn and with earth on his head, in complete solidarity with the king. Hushai is another, like Ahithophel, who is evidently one of the king's most trusted allies, but of whom there has been no mention in the story until now. Indeed when in verse 37 he is described as 'David's friend' this seems to be an official title (which recurs for example at 1 Kings 4.5) rather than a merely personal statement: he is David's Friend, his confidant and adviser, perhaps a longstanding rival to Ahithophel for the king's ear.

Again David is first to speak and again his intention is to urge his friend to turn back. This time his political strategy is unmistakable: 'If you come with me, you'll only be in the way', David tells Hushai. 'But

if you return to Jerusalem, you can ingratiate yourself with Absalom and position yourself to render useless any advice given by Ahithophel. I want you to be a double agent'. David explains to Hushai how he can use the priests and their sons as part of an intelligence network of trusted couriers to provide David with inside information about Absalom's plans.

So Hushai's return to the city coincides perfectly and providentially with the arrival of Absalom.

## **Conclusion**

The crucial question when times are hard is this: on whom will I rely? When my own resources are stretched and I am barely coping, where will I turn? It is an extraordinary mark of grace that in this episode David rediscovers that ultimately he can only rely on God. Family is not to be relied upon and friends are fickle.

It is in this sense that Christians have found over and over again that adversity can be good for the soul. When all else is taken away, there is nothing for it but to cast oneself on the mercy of God, who is faithful.

So it is that David's three encounters with Ittai, Zadok and Abiathar together, and Hushai share two features. The first is a renewed sense of trust on David's part in the purpose of God. To Ittai and to his priests, he speaks of the Lord. Immediately before his encounter with Hushai, he prays. Face to face with these potential allies, David finds himself still more directly face to face with God himself.

The second feature is his invitation to them to 'go back'. All three parties are invited to return to Jerusalem. David is not relying on them, but on God to provide. Nevertheless, it is clear that David has not abandoned his cunning. He is still planning shrewdly, though now against his own son. The upshot is that David has taken the soldier Ittai with him into the wilderness, but has deployed the priests and the diplomat behind enemy lines.

This combination of faith and trust in God with astute strategy is hard to achieve: it is much easier to combine faith and trust in God with political naivety, or expedient shrewdness with self-reliance.