March 18/19, 2017

Leadership and the Sovereignty of God

Courage to Lead Series

2 Samuel 17:1-29

Pastor Bryan Clark

This morning I would invite you to think about whatever it is that's most heavy on your heart. What is the thing that is keeping you up at night? What is the thing that you think about during the day? It could be a health issue, could be job or money, could be relationship or disappointment, could be a sin issue—whatever it is—you decide. And then, as it relates to that particular issue, what is God's part and what is your part? There is always this tension between the idea of a sovereign God, whose plan and purpose will be executed, and we as people made in the image of God, exercising our wills and making choices. And, at the end of the day, both somehow make up our story. So what is God's part? What is your part? That's what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn to 2 Samuel, Chapter 17. The last that we learned at the end of chapter 16 last week was that when Ahithophel gave counsel, gave advice, it was like listening to the voice of God Himself, which then opens the discussion for chapter 17:

> **Furthermore, Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Please let me choose 12,000 men that I may arise and pursue David tonight. I will come upon him while he is weary and exhausted and terrify him, so that all the people who are with him will flee. Then I will strike down the king alone, and I will bring back all the people to you. The return of everyone depends on the man you seek; *then* all the people will be at peace." So the plan pleased Absalom and all the elders of Israel.** (*NASB, 2 Sam. 17:1-4)

So Ahithophel gives counsel and it's widely agreed upon that this was really good council. David was disorganized; David was weary. This was the time to strike. So Ahithophel gives good counsel and Absalom and the elders agree. One of the interesting parts of this is that Ahithophel puts himself right in the middle of this action. Ahithophel isn't a soldier; he's not a warrior; he's not a commander. We don't know that he's a leader. All of a sudden he wants to lead the troops; he wants to immediately chase David down. He's also very specific: he, himself, wants to be the one that kills David. There's kind of this reminder that this is a very personal mission for him. So we assume that since the counsel of Ahithophel is like hearing from God Himself, this will be the plan. So we're quite surprised at what follows.

> **Then Absalom said, "Now call Hushai the Archite also, and let us hear what he has to say." When Hushai had come to Absalom, Absalom said to him, "Ahithophel has spoken thus. Shall we carry out his plan? If not, you speak." So Hushai said to Absalom, "This time the advice that Ahithophel has given is not good." Moreover, Hushai said, "You know your father and his men, that they are mighty men and they are fierce, like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field. And your father is an expert in warfare, and will not spend the night with the people. Behold, he has now hidden himself in one of the caves or in another place; and it will be when he falls on them at the first attack, that whoever hears *it* will say, 'There has been a slaughter among the people who follow Absalom.' And even the one who is valiant, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will completely lose heart; for all Israel knows that your father is a mighty man and those who are with him are valiant men. But I counsel that all Israel be surely gathered to you, from Dan even to Beersheba, as the sand that is by the sea**

in abundance, and that you personally go into battle. So we shall come to him in one of the places where he can be found, and we will fall on him as the dew falls on the ground; and of him and of all the men who are with him, not even one will be left. If he withdraws into a city, then all Israel shall bring ropes to that city, and we will drag it into the valley until not even a small stone is found there." Then Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel." For the LORD had ordained to thwart the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring calamity on Absalom. (Vs. 5-14)

So given what we know, we're expecting Absalom to go with Ahithophel's counsel, but for some reason he wants a second opinion. Reading through what Hushai says, it seems likely there was a high level of fear among Absalom and the army. David was a legend; David was a warrior. David and his men knew how to fight, and I don't think either Absalom or the army were real joyous about the thought of doing battle with David. So there does seem to be a fear factor, which is maybe why he asks for a second opinion.

Hushai understands the counsel of Ahithophel is good and if Absalom does it, it's likely David will be defeated. So his counsel carries the idea of buying David time—to regroup, to refresh, to make strategy, in order to stand a better chance of winning the battle. So he says, "The counsel of Ahithophel **is not good**. Your dad is a warrior; everybody knows that." The imagery in his little speech is wonderful. He says David is like a bear who has lost its cub in the meadow. He's got nothing to lose. He is fierce, and I'd think twice about messing with him. David's an experienced warrior. He's not going to be sleeping with everyone else; he's going to be off in a cave somewhere and if his troops pounce on your troops and win a victory, the people are going to panic and the battle's going to be lost. So you better slow down; rethink this. So he says, "Here's what I would do. I would bring the people out in mass from North to South—let's call everybody out." Again, to do that would have taken time. It would have given David a considerable amount of time to regroup and to strategize and to get ready for the battle. "We'll come out in mass like the sand on the seashore and we'll pounce on David and we'll be like the dew on the ground. We'll just overwhelm him. If he gets into a city, we'll come in mass. We'll pull the city apart and we'll kill everybody and Absalom will be the winner." The other part of it that's interesting is he plays to the massive ego of Absalom. "You, yourself, need to come into battle. *You* need to be the winning king in this battle," which I'm sure was appealing to Absalom.

So the text tells us that Absalom and the men of Israel thought Hushai's advice was better. Now one thing that's interesting is when Ahithophel gave his advice, it says, "Absalom and the elders thought it was good advice." The elders are not going into battle. They're the elders. When Hushai gave his advice, the text tells us that Absalom and the men of Israel, which is a reference to the army—these are the people actually going into battle—and they're saying, "I think Hushai's plan is better: the more soldiers the better. But then the text tells us in verse 14 that the reason the good counsel of Ahithophel was actually thwarted was because God is still sovereign and God's intent is that David wins and Absalom loses. No matter what Absalom does, he cannot win because God is still sovereign. God chose David to be king and God chose Solomon to follow David as king, not Absalom. So you have this very strong and unusual statement about the sovereignty of God in this whole story which we'll come back to in just a couple of minutes.

Then Hushai said to Zadok and to Abiathar the priests, "This is what Ahithophel counseled Absalom and the elders of Israel, and this is what I have counseled. Now therefore, send quickly and tell David, saying, 'Do not spend the night at the fords of the wilderness, but by all means cross over, or else the king and all the people who are

with him will be destroyed.'" Now Jonathan and Ahimaaz were staying at En-rogel, and a maidservant would go and tell them, and they would go and tell King David, for they could not be seen entering the city. But a lad did see them and told Absalom; so the two of them departed quickly and came to the house of a man in Bahurim, who had a well in his courtyard, and they went down into it. And the woman took a covering and spread it over the well's mouth and scattered grain on it, so that nothing was known. Then Absalom's servants came to the woman at the house and said, "Where are Ahimaaz and Jonathan?" And the woman said to them, "They have crossed the brook of water." And when they searched and could not find *them*, they returned to Jerusalem. It came about after they had departed that they came up out of the well and went and told King David; and they said to David, "Arise and cross over the water quickly for thus Ahithophel has counseled against you." Then David and all the people who *were* with him arose and crossed the Jordan; and by dawn not even one remained who had not crossed the Jordan. (Vs. 15-22)

So Hushai, according to the plan, goes to the priests and says, "This is Ahithophel's plan; this is my plan." At this point he doesn't know which one is going to be accepted, but the plan was that he would give that word to the priests; they would then send word through a messenger to the sons; the sons were living about a mile outside the city, so they were not seen coming and going. But there's somebody that sees what's happening, reports it to Absalom, so Absalom sends troops after the spies. They're trying to get to David first and they come to the town of Bahurim. There they find a family that gives them refuge—hides them in the well. They put something over the well, throw grain on it; the soldiers get there—this whole scene has very much the feel of Rahab in the early part of Joshua—as a matter of fact, much of the language is identical. So the spies are hidden; the soldiers are sent in the wrong direction; when they're gone, the spies come up and they go tell David what's up and they're encouraged to cross the Jordan River.

So David and his group have come to the west bank of the Jordan. If Absalom would have caught them there, they would have been trapped against the river and certainly would have been slaughtered. So overnight they cross the Jordan, get on the east side; it creates a barrier between David's troops and Absalom's troops and that's kind of where the story sits.

Now when Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled *his* donkey and arose and went to his home, to his city, and set his house in order, and strangled himself; thus he died and was buried in the grave of his father. (Vs. 23)

It's very interesting the way this is recorded in just kind of a simple, matter-of-fact one, two, three... here's what happened. Ahithophel knows that his advice, his counsel is not received, and goes back to his hometown. He gets his affairs in order and he kills himself. It's important to understand Ahithophel did not kill himself because he's throwing a little hissy fit because his advice was not listened to. He understands the big picture of what has happened. He knows full well that if Absalom would have listened to his advice, Absalom would have won the battle. But he didn't. He's listening to Hushai, and now David will have more than enough time to regroup, to refresh, to plan, to strategize, and because of that, he knows there's no way Absalom can defeat him. So he now realizes he is on the losing side. David will win; David will come back to Jerusalem; David will hunt him down and will kill him as a traitor. So he makes the decision to just take himself out.

It does raise an interesting question: Why would someone who has such a history of being a shrewd, skillful, wise counselor choose to side with Absalom—a decision that would ultimately cost him his life? The answer is because he was angry; he was bitter; he was unforgiving, and he was

seeking revenge. Whenever anyone is driven by anger, by unforgiveness, by bitterness, by a desire for revenge, they do not think clearly. You're almost guaranteed to make unfortunate decisions that have the potential of destroying your life. That's exactly what happened to Ahithophel and it cost him his life.

> **Then David came to Mahanaim. And Absalom crossed the Jordan, he and all the men of Israel with him. Absalom set Amasa over the army in place of Joab. Now Amasa was the son of a man whose name was Ithra the Israelite, who went in to Abigail the daughter of Nahash, sister of Zeruiah, Joab's mother. And Israel and Absalom camped in the land of Gilead.** (Vs. 24-26)

Now I'm sure that's abundantly clear, but in case it's not, I'll explain. All that is ultimately saying is that now Joab is with David, so the new leader of the troops is Joab's cousin—so this is truly a civil war! You have a son wanting to kill his father; this would be David's nephew, who is now the head of the troops under Absalom. So it's just demonstrating that this is a civil war—it's a family war within Israel.

> **Now when David had come to Mahanaim, Shobi the son of Nahash from Rabbah of the sons of Ammon, Machir the son of Ammiel from Lo-debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim, brought beds, basins, pottery, wheat, barley, flour, parched *grain*, beans, lentils, parched *seeds*, honey, curds, sheep, and cheese of the herd, for David and for the people who *were* with him, to eat; for they said, "The people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness."** (Vs. 27-29)

What's interesting about this is now help comes to David from the most unlikely sources: from the Ammonites, from the Gileadites while the Hebrew army is pursuing him to kill him. All of this sets the stage for a bloody civil war that we'll look at next week.

For this week, again I want you to imagine you just read this at home. The application to your every day life is abundantly clear. Right? This is one of those chapters again, in this part of the Samuel story, where you read it and you say, "I don't know what this means and I don't know what it has to do with me." It has a bunch of details that seems irrelevant. It has a bunch of weird names I can't pronounce and it's one of those chapters that reminds people: this is why I don't read the Bible. It just doesn't make sense! So I want to go back and try and unpack this a little bit. I want to remind you that these Hebrew narratives are so beautifully and skillfully written, and again this part of this story is inviting us to go back and review details that have happened as part of understanding the application that the writer wants us to see. And I want to start that in verse 14.

It's a very significant statement regarding the sovereignty of God. As a matter of fact, this is the first time in the narrative where we have a clear statement where we now know David will win; Absalom will lose. Why? Because ultimately God is in charge and God is sovereign. God chose David to be king, followed by Solomon. He did not choose Absalom and nothing Absalom does can change that. So we are reminded that Ahithophel's counsel was good, but God thwarted it because God intends for Absalom to lose.

But that raises all kinds of questions: What do we mean by that? Do we mean that everything that has transpired is part of the sovereign plan of God? If we're going to say that, then are we willing to say that God wanted David to commit adultery with Bathsheba? God wanted David to kill Uriah? That God wanted Amnon to rape Tamar? That God wanted Absalom to kill Amnon? That God wanted Absalom to kill David? What does the sovereignty of God mean? That God

orchestrated all of that? And the answer would be: *Absolutely Not*! That is a bad understanding of the sovereignty of God. There is this tension between the sovereignty of God and His plan and purpose, and the reality that we are people made in the image of God with a will to choose, and those choices do affect my story. So somehow there's the sovereign story of God and there's my story—and how those two are reconciled is impossible to really understand.

It isn't at all unusual for me to have people sit in my office whose lives are a disaster and it isn't unusual for them to say, "Why would God do this to me?" And I often have to remind them, "God didn't do this to you. You did this to you! You're the one that made all these choices that has defined the destruction of your life. God's sovereignty doesn't mean that that's what God wanted. You made choices that define the pathway of your life, but somehow within the context of the sovereign plan and purpose of God."

David fully understood this. You remember when David was escaping from Jerusalem and beginning to head up the Mount of Olives, and the priests came out with the ark and, thankfully David did not take a page out of the sons of Eli's playbook. He didn't treat the ark like it was a rabbit's foot or a lucky charm. He said, "*You can take the ark back*," and then he said, "*because I understand if God wants me to win, I will win and I will come back to Jerusalem. If God wants this to be the end of my story, then I will die,"* basically submitting to the sovereignty of God. He understood, at the end of the day, God would determine the outcome of the story. But in that moment David did not just roll over. He did not go up to a cave somewhere and have a little pouty fit. He did not just sit on a rock and *let go and let God,* which by the way is terrible theology. David understood: I have a job to do. I'm a leader. There are thousands of lives at stake and my decisions matter. So even though David clearly stated a high view of the sovereignty of God, within that he understood he had choices to make and somehow that affects the outcome of the story. So one of the first things he does is he learns that Ahithophel has betrayed him. Do you remember what he did? He prayed. And what specifically did he pray? He prayed that God would cause the counsel of Ahithophel to seem like foolishness. So then when we get to verse 14 and we are told exactly what happened—that the Lord thwarted the counsel of Ahithophel in order that Absalom would lose the battle—it is a clear statement that God answered the prayer of David, which leaves us with a question: What if David hadn't prayed? When you kind of over-exercise the idea of the sovereignty of God, it kind of becomes like a fatalistic view of life, where God's going to do what He's going to do and nothing we say or do changes that, which is just simply false. The text is very clear, not only to tell us David prayed, but exactly what he prayed for. And then it tells us not only that Absalom listened to the counsel of Hushai, but it tells us specifically: this is what God did, which clearly reflects an answer to David's prayer. Clearly the intent of the text is David prayed; God listened, and God acted. How does the prayer of a man move the hand of a sovereign God? I don't know. But we would be wrong to dismiss that from the text as if David's choice to pray and trust God with that didn't somehow matter. David prayed—God answered.

Almost immediately after that, do you remember what David did? It's when he encountered Hushai. He's going up the front side of the Mount of Olives, runs into his friend Hushai, and Hushai says, "I want to go with you." What does David do? David immediately makes a decision. "It would be better for you to go back and pretend to be a counselor for Absalom, and then you can function as a spy. And when you know what he's going to do, then you can tell the priests; the priests will tell their sons; the sons can come deliver the message, and I'll tell them exactly where I'll be hiding." The text that we read this morning tells us that plan was executed flawlessly, down to the detail. Why would it tell us that if it's not telling us those decisions mattered? You have the sovereign plan of God, but you have David acting as a responsible leader, laying out strategy that

was perfectly executed, as a part of what leads to his victory—which again is reminding us that both matter. There's God's part and there's David's part.

Immediately then when the spies leave, they come to the town of Bahurim—hopefully that sounds familiar because in the previous chapter that was the place where Shimei came forth and was hurling rocks and yelling curses on David. So we're now back to that same place and we were told that this was the place of the extended clan of Saul. So the question would be: why would Saul's extended family, at the risk of their own lives, create a place of safety and refuge for David's spies? Answer is because two decades previously, David had shown great respect for Saul and for Jonathan. When they died, he uttered this wonderful tribute. David has been overly compassionate to Saul and his family. He was generous and kind to Mephibosheth and in the midst of all of that, he clearly endeared himself to Saul's extended family. Now twenty years later, in his hour of need, that decision matters because they're willing to give the spies refuge.

But it's even more recent than that. Do you remember what happened when Shimei was yelling curses and throwing rocks and Abishai stepped up and said, "Just give me the word and I'll go up there and cut off his head. Why should you put up with this?" What if David would have said, "You know, I'm tired of it too; go cut his head off." What would have been the chance that less than twenty-four hours later, when those spies arrived in that same town, that those people would have been sympathetic to the spies of David if David's men would have just cut off the head of one of their own? The answer is: none. Because David heard the voice of God, understood God was speaking, didn't allow Abishai to cut off Shimei's head, it created a context where it was possible for the spies to be housed and find refuge in order eventually to get to David. You see all these little choices that mattered.

So then we come to Mahanaim and that may or may not sound familiar. The first thing we know is that was the home of Ishbosheth. Ishbosheth was the one son of Saul who was made king over the North by Abner, and he ruled there for several years until a couple of mercenaries murdered him. Do you remember when that happened? David had been kind and respectful to Ishbosheth. When he was murdered, David went out of his way to distance himself from that behavior. As a matter of fact, he took the hands and the feet of the murderers, pinned them to the walls, a way of saying this should not have happened and David totally disagreed. He did a tribute to Ishbosheth and then he buried him in a very respectful way and clearly endeared himself to the people in that town because of his response. Now two decades later, that decision matters. David had endeared himself to these people and they were willing to give him refuge.

There are two other names that are interesting in that last paragraph. One of those would be Shobi, Shobi the son of Nahash. Why would the Ammonite king offer refuge and food to the Hebrew king? We go all the way back to the story when we were told that David had entered into a peace agreement with Nahash. They had respected one another; they had cared for one another; they had worked it out that they might live in peace together. When Nahash died, you remember David sent tribute. He sent his sympathies to Nahash's son, Hanun, to say he was sorry to hear of the death of the king. But Hanun thought David was up to something, so if you remember the story, he cut off their robes and sent them back half-naked, shaved off half of their beards in order to humiliate them, and started a war. So now, how many years later is it? Apparently Hanun is dead; Shobi is now king of Ammon and he remembers David's kindness to his father and the covenant that David had made with his father, and he shows his appreciation for that by giving David safety, refuge, and all of this food.

One more name that's interesting there is the name, Machir. We say, "Who is that guy?" Well, if you remember the Mephibosheth story, when David wanted to do something for the family of Saul, he learned that there is a son of Jonathan who is crippled that's still alive. Where does he live? He lives in Mahanaim. And who does he live with? He lives with a guy by the name of Machir. Because he was crippled, he had no chance to survive. But Machir takes him in, takes care of him, and so David pours out generosity on Mephibosheth and blesses him many times over, which endears him to the family of Machir. And now this many years later, in David's hour of need, they're more than happy to return the favor by giving him shelter and refuge and food, and to prepare themselves for battle.

So all of those little details and names are not insignificant. They remind us of the choices and decisions David has made all along the way that define his story, which then brings us to your story. What is it that is heavy on your heart this morning? What part of that is God's part? And what part of that is your part? There is this sobering reality that whatever it is, there's only so much you can do. You probably can't change it; you probably can't fix it. You can't probably just make it get better. What you can do is limited—and you're reminded that, ultimately, most of it is in God's hands. Sometimes God seems a million miles away, and it seems like He just doesn't care and He's not involved—and it just seems like the circumstances of life are against you and nobody really cares. But then you have to remember that God is sovereign. God does have a plan and purpose. It's not just random chaos in the world. God is up to something. He does have a plan and purpose for your story. It's probably very likely you'll never understand it while on this earth, but that doesn't mean God isn't up to something. It doesn't mean that God doesn't have a plan and purpose that He's executing with your life. There is a bigger story at play. You have to trust Him with that.

But you have to also realize: my decisions matter. My decisions do shape the pathway of my life and so they matter. All that can sometimes seem overwhelming, so we reduce it down to whatever it is that's heavy on your heart. What would it mean for you to do your part today? What would it mean for you to do the right thing today? What is God asking of you today? You need to be clear and diligent about your part, and you need to be responsible to *do* your part. The rest of it is up to God,and you have to trust God with His part. So there's your part and there's God's part that somehow together will make up your story!

Our Father, we are a bit sobered again this morning with the story of David. God, we're reminded that You are sovereign. At the end of the day Your plan and purpose will prevail. Absalom could not win. But we're also reminded that David made many decisions for good and for bad that defined his story and affected the lives of thousands of people. God, help us to understand what You're asking us to do today, that we might do the right thing today, and then give us the courage and faith to trust You with the rest of the story.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

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March 18/19 2017

Leadership and the Sovereignty of God

Courage to Lead

II Samuel 17:1-29

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. How do you explain the tension between the sovereign will of God and the decisions we make as people made in His image? How can both be true?

2. What one thing seems to be most on your mind these days? What keeps you awake at night or causes you concern most days? What's most heavy on your heart?

Bible Study

1. Read II Samuel 16:20-17:4 to get the flow of the narrative. Given what the narrator said about Ahithophel what are we as readers expecting when he counsels Absalom? Now read II Samuel 17:5-14. What does the text say about why Absalom asked for and listened to Hushai's advice?

2. Review David's prayer in II Samuel 15:31. How does God answer that prayer? What if David had not prayed? Would God have done this anyway? If so, why bother telling us David's prayer?

3. What if David had just given up when Absalom was leading the revolution? What if he'd played the victim and said, "woe is me" and done nothing? What difference did it make that he sent Hushai?

4. Read II Samuel 17:15-29. How are the spies treated in Bahurim? How might the story have been different if David had been cruel to the household of Saul years earlier or if he'd allowed Abishai to kill Shimei?

5. What caused Shobi and Machir to assist David in his hour of need? What if David had been cruel to Nahash and Mephibosheth? In what ways do you see both the sovereignty of God and the choices of man playing out in the story? What do we learn from this?

6. Ahithophel killed himself because he realized he would be on the losing side. If he was so wise why did he align himself with Absalom? How might his bitterness and desire for revenge clouded his otherwise good judgment? Does anyone think clearly when they are operating out of anger or bitterness or unforgiveness?

Application

1. You cannot go back and change the past. What is done is done. What you can effect is today and tomorrow. What does this tell us about where to focus our attention day to day?

2. What did you list in the opening discussion question #2? What is God's part and what is your part? What can you do? Are you doing that?

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