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When Leaders Fail

Courage to Lead Series

2 Samuel 18: 1-33

Pastor Bryan Clark

Leadership is influence, and we've reminded ourselves: it is a sobering responsibility to influence another human life! Because this is true, when leaders fail, they never fail in isolation. It always affects other people. The wider the sphere of influence, the more damage is done when leaders fail. Probably every person here this morning could share your own story of deep wounds because a leader failed. It leaves within our heart a longing for a better leader. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 2 Samuel, Chapter 18. If you're visiting with us, we're working our way through 1 and 2 Samuel. We left the story last week where Absalom and David's troops are both staged for this inevitable, bloody civil war. We pick it up in chapter 18, verse 1:

> **Then David numbered the people who were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. David sent the people out, one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the command of Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the people, "I myself will surely go out with you also." But the people said, "You should not go out; for if we indeed flee, they will not care about us; even if half of us die, they will not care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us; therefore now it is better that you *be ready* to help us from the city." Then the king said to them, "Whatever seems best to you I will do." So the king stood beside the gate, and all the people went out by hundreds and thousands. The king charged Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "*Deal* gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king charged all the commanders concerning Absalom.** (*NASB, 2 Samuel 18-1-5)

The intent when Hushai gave his advice in the previous chapter, was that it would buy David time in order to refresh and regroup and plan a strategy, which is exactly what has happened. They are now in Mahanaim, which was the town where Ishbosheth ruled. It's a walled city. It would have been the perfect staging place. David divides the troops into thirds, led by Joab and Abishai, and interestingly enough, a Philistine by the name of Ittai. So David intends to go out to battle with them. We can't help but remember that about a decade previously, when David was on the top of his game, "*when kings went out in the spring of the year to fight,"* David made the choice to stay home. He was bored; he was restless; he spent the afternoon in bed taking a nap and that evening committed his terrible sin with Bathsheba. That was the beginning of a series of terrible choices that have devastated both his family and the nation. So now David is engaged again. He fully intends to go to battle, but this is a civil war. This isn't a war about boundaries or land. This is as simple as: either Absalom gets knocked off or David gets knocked off—winner take all. So the troops understand that, and they want David to stay back in Mahanaim where he is safe, so they don't have to worry about him, and let them fight the battle. David agrees, and then he says what seems like a difficult to process request. He tells the commanders he wants them basically to spare, go easy on, take care of...spare his son Absalom. It's also interesting that the narrator tells us that everyone heard that. It wasn't whispered in a corner. It wasn't misunderstood. Somehow, some way, at this

point in the story, David still seems to be deluded regarding his son. He believes somehow, some way there can be a good ending to the story, and somehow Absalom will change his mind and they will be reconciled. Verse 6:

> **Then the people went out into the field against Israel, and the battle took place in the forest of Ephraim. The people of Israel were defeated there before the servants of David, and the slaughter there that day was great, 20,000 men. For the battle there was spread over the whole countryside, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword devoured.** (Vs. 6-8)

It's interesting, there are only three verses given to the actual battle, and this has been a consistent pattern throughout 1 and 2 Samuel. This isn't about the nation and all the activities; it's about the nation's leaders. This chapter is about Absalom and David. So the battle itself gets three verses. We aren't told much other than the forces of Absalom, while they were much greater in number, were simply no match for the forces of David. David's men had spent over a decade as guerilla fighters in the wilderness. They knew exactly how to fight in the wilderness. Absalom's soldiers did not. One day! Battle over! You can't help but think about what seems to be kind of a passing mention that 20,000 soldiers died! These are soldiers that had families, that had people that loved them—were in many ways just innocent people. It started with David's failure as a leader, that led to a series of choices, that led to Absalom's rebellion and because of the failure of two leaders, 20,000 innocent people died—which reminds us of the sobering toll of what happens when leaders fail. The text tells us that the forest actually took more lives than the sword itself. Verse 9:

> **Now Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. For Absalom was riding on *his* mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. And his head caught fast in the oak, so he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him kept going. When a certain man saw *it,* he told Joab and said, "Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak." Then Joab said to the man who had told him, "Now behold, you saw *him*! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? And I would have given you ten *pieces* of silver and a belt." The man said to Joab, "Even if I should receive a thousand *pieces of* silver in my hand, I would not put out my hand against the king's son; for in our hearing the king charged you and Abishai and Ittai, saying, 'Protect for me the young man Absalom!' Otherwise, if I had dealt treacherously against his life (and there is nothing hidden from the king), then you yourself would have stood aloof." Then Joab said, "I will not waste time here with you." So he took three spears in his hand and thrust them through the heart of Absalom while he was yet alive in the midst of the oak. And ten young men who carried Joab's armor gathered around and struck Absalom and killed him.** (Vs. 10-15)

This paragraph presents Absalom in almost a comical fashion. Absalom is completely ill-equipped to lead the troops in battle. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that Absalom would play well in 21st century American politics. He had the charisma; he had the look; he had the political savvy; he had the image, but when it was time to actually lead the troops, he was completely inept. So here he is, somehow all by himself in the forest, riding a mule. The mule was a symbol of a king. He had placed himself on the mule, declaring himself to be king. But somehow, all by himself, he gets his head stuck in an oak tree. Those of us who grew up in the church always heard about Absalom getting his *hair* caught in the tree, but it's not hair, it's head—and that matters. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago about this repetition and emphasis on the head, which was imagery of power and kind of the storyline, and here you have Absalom who placed himself in a place of power, who

ultimately leads himself to his own demise. You have this sense in which there is this tension between the sovereignty of God and Absalom's choices that we talked about last week. You have this strange story of Absalom placing himself on the mule, in essence declaring himself to be king and, in essence then, God removes him from the throne when he gets his head stuck in a tree and the mule just keeps going. There are no soldiers around. It's this battle between the sovereignty of God and Absalom's choices. We mentioned last week, no matter what Absalom did, he stood virtually no chance of winning. The sovereign God had determined that David was the King of Israel; there was nothing Absalom could do to change that. So here you have him described as hanging between heaven and earth, which is kind of another way of saying this tension between the sovereignty of God and Absalom's choices—and there he hangs. He, in essence, dethroned himself on the basis of God's sovereignty.

So a soldier sees him, tells Joab, and Joab is incensed that he didn't kill him. He tells him he would have given him **ten pieces of silver and a belt**. Most scholars think that Joab had put a bounty out on Absalom's head. Whoever gets him, gets the reward. So you have this ongoing tension between Joab and David—we've seen it throughout the story. So David wants Absalom protected—he wants him rescued, he wants grace and mercy, he wants somehow this story to have a good ending. Joab, as the commander, knows that isn't going to happen. In order to stop this bloody revolution, Absalom must die. So it appears he put out a bounty on Absalom's head. But the soldier understands, "*Even if you gave me 1,000 pieces of silver, I wouldn't do it*." Basically what he's saying is, "You can't spend the silver if you're dead and if the king found out who did it, pretty good chance the king would put him to death." As a matter of fact he says to Joab, "If the king found out it was me, you would have stood aloof." In other words, what he's saying is, "This was your little plan—to get somebody to kill Absalom because you didn't want to do it because the king might react and when that person was charged before David, you would be nowhere to be found." And that probably seems right. We have learned Joab is kind of a deceitful schemer, kind of politically savvy, and that's probably exactly what he was up to. His reaction then kind of bears that out. He just gets upset, pushes the soldier aside, takes what the text says—**three spears**—*and ran them through Absalom's heart*. The actual Hebrew is *three sticks*. There's a lot of debate about what actually happened here. Joab was a professional soldier. He was a professional killer. It's hard to imagine he needed anything more than one spear if the intent was simply to do Absalom in. What seems more likely is he had three small sticks he had sharpened; he puts them into Absalom's chest, but then ten other soldiers come up; they all put their spears in Absalom so that when the king says, "Who killed my son?" it isn't one person. There's a whole group of people that did it and that seems to be the plan.

> **Then Joab blew the trumpet, and the people returned from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained the people. They took Absalom and cast him into a deep pit in the forest and erected over him a very great heap of stones. And all Israel fled, each to his tent. Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself a pillar which is in the King's Valley, for he said, "I have no son to preserve my name." So he named the pillar after his own name, and it is called Absalom's Monument to this day.** (Vs. 16-18)

So Joab blows the trumpet. The fighting stops; Israel goes back to their tents. They take Absalom, throw him in a pit, erect stones over the top of him, which gives him the most shameful burial. It would be a burial for the most infamous person they could imagine. So in this culture, this is the most they could do to shame Absalom. But the text also tells us that somewhere in Absalom's lifetime, at one time we were told he had three sons. Most believe by this point, all three sons had died somehow, so he identified he had no sons to carry on his name, and he erected a monument to

himself. The text says he *set up* a monument, but it's the exact same Hebrew word, he *erected* a monument to himself. So what the text basically says is that when Absalom was alive, he erected a monument to himself. When he died, Joab and the soldiers threw him in a pit and erected their own monument to Absalom. There is kind of this sobering reminder in the story that would be well for anyone in the 21st century to understand—that you can do everything in your power to erect monuments in your name, but at the end of the day when you're gone, it is only the people who remain who knew you best that will define your legacy. Joab and the soldiers erected their own pitiful monument in the burial of Absalom.

> **Then Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said, "Please let me run and bring the king news that the LORD has freed him from the hand of his enemies." But Joab said to him, "You are not the man to carry news this day, but you shall carry news another day; however, you shall carry no news today because the king's son is dead." Then Joab said to the Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have seen." So the Cushite bowed to Joab and ran. Now Ahimaaz the son of Zadok said once more to Joab, "But whatever happens, please let me also run after the Cushite." And Joab said, "Why would you run, my son, since you will have no reward for going?" "But whatever happens," *he said*, "I will run." So he said to him, "Run." Then Ahimaaz ran by way of the plain and passed up the Cushite.** (Vs. 19-23)

In this part of the story, Ahimaaz seems both young and naïve. In his mind, this is great news. David's troops have won and he can't wait to run to David and to give him the news. What he fails to understand is in David's mind, this is not good news. Joab said, "This is not your day to deliver the news. The king's son is dead." So he sends the Cushite. Joab knows through experience that David does not always respond well to messengers that think they're bringing good news—in essence trying to save Ahimaaz's life. Apparently he thought the Cushite was expendable, so he sends him. But Ahimaaz insists, so finally Joab relents, tells him to run, and Ahimaaz overtakes the Cushite.

> **Now David was sitting between the two gates; and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and raised his eyes and looked, and behold, a man running by himself. The watchman called and told the king. And the king said, "If he is by himself there is good news in his mouth." And he came nearer and nearer. Then the watchman saw another man running; and the watchman called to the gatekeeper and said, "Behold, *another* man running by himself." And the king said, "This one also is bringing good news." The watchman said, "I think the running of the first one is like the running of Ahimaaz, the son of Zadok." And the king said, "This is a good man and comes with good news."** (Vs. 24-27)

This part of the story is kind of a sad, pathetic picture of David. It's very much like Eli sitting at the gate in the early part of 1Samuel, waiting for word regarding his sons and the battle. So David is waiting—someone in the tower is watching—and you have this sense that David is wanting with all of his might that somehow the news will be good—that in this moment Absalom suddenly repented, changed his mind, and there would be this reconciliation and this wonderful ending to this terrible story. So the man in the tower says there's one man coming and David says, "If it's one man, it's got to be good news." The watchman says, "I see another one coming; he's all by himself." And David says, "If there's a second runner, it has to be good news." The person in the tower identifies, "I think it is Ahimaaz." The logic of David's next remark makes no sense: "He's a good man;

therefore it must be good news." You get this sense in which he so desperately wants to believe the story will have this happy, fairytale ending.

> **Ahimaaz called and said to the king, "All is well."** (literally shalom) **And he prostrated himself before the king with his face to the ground. And he said, "Blessed is the LORD your God, who has delivered up the men who lifted their hands against my lord the king." The king said, "Is it well** (again, shalom) **with the young man Absalom?" And Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent the king's servant, and your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I did not know what *it was*." Then the king said, "Turn aside and stand here." So he turned aside and stood still.** (Vs. 28-30)

Again Ahimaaz seems very naïve in this moment. He gets to David and he declares, "Wonderful news, our team won!" David seems to not be interested in that at all, but immediately asks, "What happened to Absalom?" It's like in this moment that Ahimaaz suddenly realizes: 'Uh oh.' He just hadn't thought about this. This is what is most on David's heart and in that moment he gives kind of a bumbling answer that makes virtually no sense. David picks up on that, pushes him to the side and wants to talk to the Cushite.

> **Behold, the Cushite arrived, and the Cushite said, "Let my lord the king receive good news, for the LORD has freed you this day from the hand of all those who rose up against you." Then the king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And the Cushite answered, "Let the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up against you for evil, be as that young man!"** (Vs. 31-32)

The Cushite had clearly thought about what he was going to say. He talks in very clear, articulate words. When David asks about Absalom, he answers the question very skillfully, but clearly identifies that Absalom is dead.

> **The king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And thus he said as he walked, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"** (Vs. 33)

Five times in that one verse David repeats the words, "My son, my son, my son." David, in this moment, is an absolutely devastated and broken man. When Saul and Jonathan died, David offered a wonderful tribute. When Ishbosheth died, David offered a wonderful tribute. When his own son through Bathsheba died, he offered words of wisdom. But in this moment, he is totally broken and devastated and can say nothing other than to repeat, "My son, my son, my son." David utters that he would have died rather than Absalom, which takes us back to chapter 11. We are reminded that one spring evening when kings went out to war, David stayed home. And that evening he would commit adultery with Bathsheba that would lead to a series of decisions that would devastate his family and the nation. At the end of this story, 20,000 innocent people would pay for that sin. I am absolutely positive that over the decade David revisited that night in his mind over and over and over again. And with everything he possessed, if he could, he would go back and change that moment.

You remember when Nathan the prophet rebuked David, he assured him that he was forgiven. He said, "David you are forgiven. You will not die." David understood he had committed a capital crime. He deserved to die but God allowed him to live—but the consequences of his sin would be great! David now in this moment, in his grief, is actually saying he would rather have just died as punishment for his sin then to have experienced all that has transpired over the years because of his

great sin. You remember when Nathan told the story—the parable about the poor man that had the lamb and the rich man took the poor man's lamb and offered it because he didn't want to use one of his own, David was so angry that he said that the rich man must return the poor man's lamb four times over. Count them: David's son through Bathsheba...died. Amnon...died. Tamar...raped. Abasalom...died. David modeled two things to his sons: sexual immorality and murder. His sons learned the lesson well and he paid for it four times over. At this moment he is just a broken man—and we are reminded of the devastating consequences of sin. No one just gets away with sin. Sin is devastating and it is destructive.

We also think about Joab in this story. Joab, was he right or was he wrong? David had said, "I want my son spared." But in that moment, was David in a frame of mind to rightly lead the nation? What was the possibility that Absalom was going to repent...that Absalom could ever be trusted again... that Absalom, someday would rightfully sit on the throne? Or was Joab right in that moment to administer justice? Had Absalom been spared, how many thousands more people would die? In that moment when Joab killed Absalom, he blew the trumpet and the killing stopped. I would suggest to you, that in this story Joab represents justice, that Absalom in his rebellion deserved to die.

So we're back to this sad, pathetic picture of David. David seems broken, a sad character in this part of the story. As a matter of fact, for the king to want Absalom spared and to believe there could be some sort of reconciliation seems really reckless. As a matter of fact, David's behavior in this moment seems really scandalous. And then we remember that David is meant to be a type—a shadow—of the perfect king to come. The story of Samuel is the nation longing for that perfect king. Saul was a terrible king. David was a great king but he was not a perfect king, and his failure cost thousands of people their lives. But we are reminded, as the nation longed for a better king, longed for that perfect king, that about a thousand years later one would be born who would be described as Son of God, Son of David, the long awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world—that the perfect king would finally come. The king that they had all longed for, this King would actually shed his blood on a cross in atonement for sin.

You remember what David said in that moment of brokenness. David wished with all of his heart that he could give his own life in exchange for Absalom. What David was unable to do, the perfect King would do a thousand years later. He would actually die our death. We are Absalom in the story. We are desirous of being our own king. We put ourselves on the throne. We live in rebellion. We want to do things our own way. We're leading the revolt against God and His standards, and the New Testament says while we had declared ourselves to be enemies of God, while we were living at war with God, while we were putting ourselves on the throne, Christ died for us. We were the rebellious ones but Jesus died our death on the cross. He did for us what David so longed to be able to do for Absalom, in order that we might experience salvation and forgiveness of our sins. What David kind of pathetically longed for while sitting at the gate was good news. Good news! "Good news, please tell me there's good news to the end of the story." The New Testament describes what Jesus did for us as the *Gospel*, which means *good news*. The perfect King came and did for us what David could not do for Absalom, in order that our rebellious story could have a wonderful, joyful ending, as we as sinful people are reconciled with a holy God.

But it is also a reminder then that the grace and mercy of Jesus is not an excuse to minimize sin. It's not a reason by which we think: I can sin tonight, get forgiveness in the morning—no harm, no foul. As a matter of fact, it's just the opposite. Your sin cost Jesus his life. He exchanged your death for His death. He took your death on the cross in order to pay for your sin. Your sin and my sin must be taken seriously. So often as Christians we get in this pattern of: Sin...sorry; Sin...sorry; Sin...sorry.

We need to understand that will not do! You're going to wake up one morning and find yourself in a place you never thought you'd be and you're going to wonder, "How did I get here?" I'll tell you how you got there—Sin...sorry; Sin...sorry; Sin...sorry which is indicative of not taking sin seriously. True confession is to agree with God that, "My behavior is offensive to God," and what comes with that—what's implied in that—is a realization that, because it's offensive to God, it must stop and it must stop now! I have said several times in this series, at some point you have to have the courage to put a stake in the ground and say, "I am done with this. I cannot continue to live with this Sin... sorry; Sin...sorry; Sin...sorry pattern. At some point I put a stake in the ground, and I am ready to live in the freedom and the release that God offers me from this sin. From the middle part of January to now we have been going from David's sin with Bathsheba to the death of Absalom and it's been a very intense ride.

So as this part of 2 Samuel closes, we want to give you an opportunity to process this a little bit. I'm going to invite the band to come back up on the stage. I'm going to invite the ushers to come and begin distributing the stakes. I've used the language multiple times: "At some point you put a stake in the ground and you make a decision." So we're going to distribute to you a small stake. This is for you; this is between you and God. You'll get a marker, and what I encourage you to do is quietly, prayerfully before God, think about it. What is it that God has been teaching you in the last couple of months? What is it you want to take and put a stake in the ground and make a decision about? Write it on the stake; put the date there; take it home with you; put it somewhere where it will remind you of your determination to make some sort of a change in your life. If it's a sin issue and you want to keep it private, just write it in code. It's between you and God. You know what it says. Perhaps for some of you, there's failure in your past and as a result of that, you've put yourself on the bench. You've put yourself on the 'B' team. You've put yourself on the sidelines and what God is saying is, "You know what, at some point that's enough of that. Failure is never final." You put a stake in the ground and you say, "I'm back in. I'm signing up for the 'A' team. I want to be part of the team that changes the world and I'm in." For some of you, as we talked about a couple of weeks ago, it's time to take your life off cruise control. You're not doing anything bad; you're not getting into trouble. But honestly, you've just put your life on cruise control and you're cruising in to the finish line, which is a good way to waste your life. At some point you have to ask again, "What is God asking of me, and what does God want me to do that gives me both a sense of exhilaration and a feeling of terror—that God is calling me out of the boat into something that is so big that if God oversleeps, I am in real trouble?" Whatever it is for you that we've talked about over these last couple of months, think about it; process it; pray about it; write it on the stake. You're putting a stake in the ground. As of this morning, something is going to change and this is the beginning of a new journey for me. We'll give you a little time to do that and then the band will lead us in a closing song.

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When Leaders Fail

Courage to Lead

2 Samuel 18:1-33

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Leaders, by definition, influence other people so when leaders fail, others are affected. How have you experienced this? Home? Work? Church?

2. Does anyone really sin in isolation? Is it really possible to sin and not have it affect anyone else? Explain.

Bible Study

1. Read II Samuel 18:1-8. Why do you think the writer puts such an emphasis on David's words regarding Absalom in 18:5? Is the outcome David wants even possible given the circumstances? What emotion is this intended to stir up in us?

2. The record of the battle is brief with no details other than David routed Absalom and the forest claimed more lives than the sword and 20,000 die. The story is clearly about David and Absalom and not the greater nation. Yet, it's worth pondering the cost of both David's and Absalom's leadership failures. Review how many people have been affected by the choices of these two men?

3. Read II Samuel 18:9-18. How does Absalom die and what symbolism do you find in this part of the story? Could Absalom have won given what we were told in 17:14? Can anyone fight God and win? Was Joab right or wrong in killing Absalom? What were the options? What was his concern?

4. What is the significance of Absalom erecting a monument to himself and the people erecting a monument to Absalom? Who defines our legacy?

5. Read II Samuel 18:19-33. What does Joab know about David that Ahimaaz seems to be clueless about? How does that help to underscore the focus of the story? Is the chapter about the military victory or about David's heart for his rebellious son?

6. Try to imagine what is going through David's mind as he waits at the gate for news? How does his last statement of the chapter give us a clue? How many times do you think David relived the choices he made that spring evening from chapter 11? What was the cost of a few moments of pleasure?

Application

1. What is the cost of sin in the David and Absalom story? How do the sins of the leaders effect those being led?

2. David's heart for his rebellious son seems almost reckless as the king. It's as if he's clueless regarding Absalom and all the people Absalom has negatively affected. How is David a shadow of the perfect King to come, the Savior of the world? Compare Romans 5:6-11.

3. If you're comfortable doing so, share what you put on your "stake" in the ground? You can be as general or specific as you wish to be.

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