

## Grace in the Wilderness...Yet Again

2 Samuel 15-17

I have entitled this message “Grace in the Wilderness...Yet Again” as a throwback to my sermon on 1 Samuel 21-26. It was entitled, not surprisingly, “Grace in the Wilderness.” In 1 Samuel 21-26, we saw David on the run from his persecutor, King Saul. Seven times David came into some form of danger, and all seven times the Lord delivered him and gave him a reminder of his promise to David that he would become king. Here in 2 Samuel 15-17, we see David going out into the wilderness again. Once again he is being pursued by an outwardly impressive man, this time his son Absalom. Once more he will see evidences of God’s grace all around him in a time of turmoil and distress. But there is a major difference between these chapters and 1 Samuel 21-26. When David ran from King Saul, he did so for no fault of his own. He was the target of unjust persecution that sprang from Saul’s jealousy. But this time David suffers in the wilderness because of his own sin.

In 2 Samuel 11, we read about David’s terrible act of adultery with the wife of his loyal soldier Uriah and his murder of Uriah to cover his tracks when he found out about her pregnancy. The prophet Nathan confronted David about his sin, and David repented and was forgiven. But the Lord through Nathan told King David there would be remaining consequences for his action. 2 Samuel 12:10-12 reads, “Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ Thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.’” These verses are God’s decree that stands over all of what happens in chapters 13-20. God is disciplining his son, King David.

It is one thing to suffer. It is another thing to suffer and to know that your suffering is a consequence of your own sin. Many of us can take suffering, but we dare not face the terrifying combination of suffering *and* a guilty conscience. We’re fine in the role of David in his first sojourn in the wilderness, but put us in the role of David in his second wilderness excursion, and the burden of our own failure seems too much to bear. It is very tempting to conclude in the wilderness that God is against us, that he has turned his favor away from us forever, and we have no hope. I proclaim to you today, on the authority of the Word of God: that is a lie. If you are a child of God in Christ, you are *never* cut off from the love of God your Father. Never, no matter what your conscience tells you, no matter what your circumstances suggest. We will see that play out in the story of David here in chapters 15-17 and in 18-20. In spite of David’s sin and suffering as a consequence, we will see that the Lord’s steadfast love remains on him, communicated by signs of grace at every turn. I want to walk through the major contours of this story today and then make a point of application to our lives as we reflect on it.

We pick up this story in chapter 15 with the introduction of the main conflict:

### **1. A rebellion against the Lord’s anointed (15:1-12)**

Let’s remember where we last left off. Absalom, King David’s son, had committed an act of premeditated murder against his half-brother Amnon as revenge for Amnon’s rape of Absalom’s sister Tamar. Absalom then went into exile to Geshur for three years, until David foolishly

agreed to allow him to come back to Jerusalem, and then two years after that, David foolishly allowed Absalom access back into the royal court. Absalom pulled off one of the greatest comeback stories in Israel's history.

So now in chapter 15 we pick up with Absalom back in Jerusalem, with access to the king's presence. With his comeback now complete, Absalom decided to become a politician, and it turns out he was very good at it. He acquired a chariot and horses, along with fifty men to be his personal security team, and he rose early every morning to go out to the entrance of the gate where people would come from all over Israel to bring their cases before the king for judgment. Absalom would listen to their grievances and then work to undermine their confidence in King David. "You have a just cause, but sadly, the king doesn't have anyone available to listen to you. If I had authority to judge, I would take your side." And when a person would come to bow down to Absalom, he would instead grab that person and kiss him, sending the message, "You are my equal, and I care about you." At a 1992 political rally, Bill Clinton famously responded to a heckler by saying, "I feel your pain." Absalom is the populist politician who said to everyone he encountered, "I feel your pain." And he won over the hearts of many in Israel, building a coalition of loyal supporters throughout the nation as these travelers came to Jerusalem and then went back home to tell their friends and families about this impressive, good-looking, compassionate son of King David.

This process went on for four years as Absalom patiently awaited his opportunity. And when he knew the time was right, he executed a brilliant plan against his father. He asked for permission to go to the city of Horeb, the same city where David had first been installed as king over the tribe of Judah and the city of Absalom's birth. The reason he wanted to go was to fulfill a vow he said he had made to the Lord, namely, that if the Lord ever brought him back to Jerusalem from Geshur, he would offer a special sacrifice out of gratitude. Now, that claim should have seemed fishy, because why would Absalom have waited six years to fulfill a vow like that? Nevertheless, David, deceived yet again by his lying, blaspheming son, let him go. Absalom took with him two-hundred men from Jerusalem. These were men who were in David's service, and they went to Horeb with no idea what Absalom was planning. Meanwhile, Absalom had sent secret messages throughout all Israel to gather his supporters to Horeb so that they could declare him king at the blast of a trumpet. And when that trumpet sounded and the shouts arose, David's two-hundred servants from Jerusalem essentially became hostages to Absalom's forces. Absalom succeeded in having himself declared king while simultaneously depriving David of two-hundred of his administrative leaders in Jerusalem.

But then to cap it all off, Absalom sent to the city of Giloh to summon Ahithophel the Gilonite into his service. Ahithophel may very well have been the grandfather of Bathsheba, and he may have known about David's sin with her and against her husband, which could have been his motivation to betray David. But aside from that question, Ahithophel was David's MVP, his most capable advisor, who was now in service to David's rival. Absalom's plan was diabolical, brilliant, and effective, and it left David in a weak position.

Absalom is the new Saul, an outwardly impressive man who is staunchly set against David. He is attractive, cunning, and ruthless. His willingness to lie about a vow to the Lord to cover his plan shows his willingness to take the Lord's name in vain without any pains of conscience. But all

his actions are bringing to fulfillment what the Lord had spoken to David in 2 Samuel 12:11: “Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house.” All of Absalom’s diabolical wickedness comes to pass by God’s decree. And here’s the marvelous thing about it all: it is not coming against David because the Lord hates David. It is because the Lord loves him as a Father loves a son.

The next movement of the story is

## **2. The exile of the Lord’s anointed (15:13-37)**

When David heard the news about his son’s insurrection, he found himself in Jerusalem with two-hundred of his most capable servants missing. So he made the decision to leave Jerusalem to protect himself, to organize his forces, and to spare Jerusalem from the sufferings of war. Verse 16 provides an important, yet ominous detail: “So the king went out, and all his household after him. And the king left ten concubines [lower level wives] to keep the house.” We will see why that matters later.

As King David goes into exile, signs of the Lord’s grace appear to him through three encounters he has with servants as he makes his way out of Jerusalem, across the Brook Kidron, and up the ascent of the Mount of Olives. The first encounter is with Ittai the Gittite and all the men who accompanied him (15:18-23). Ittai was not an Israelite but a Philistine, which is ironic, since the Philistines were so often enemies of Israel in David’s lifetime. Even more ironic is the fact that he was from the city of Gath, the same city that was home to the renowned warrior Goliath, David’s most famous victim. David pleaded with Ittai not to go with him: “You just showed up recently. This is not your fight to deal with.” Note Ittai’s oath in verse 21: “But Ittai answered the king, ‘As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king shall be, whether for death or for life, there also will your servant be.’” As we will find out in 18:2, Ittai will become a commander of a third of David’s forces, serving bravely and loyally in battle. It is a remarkable providence of God that a man from the city of Goliath did not become an enemy of King David but one of his most loyal servants. Ittai’s loyalty is a sign of the steadfast love of the Lord to David in the wilderness.

The second of David’s encounters is with Abiathar and Zadok the priests (15:24-29). They came with a band of Levites, who were carrying the ark of the covenant with them. They were prepared to take the ark into exile along with the king. But David did not allow them to do it. Verses 25-26 read, “Then the king said to Zadok, ‘Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me back and let me see both it and his dwelling place. But if he says, “I have no pleasure in you,” behold, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him.’” Back in 1 Samuel 4, the priests Hophni and Phineas carried the ark into battle against the Philistines. It ended in disaster. It was their wicked attempt to assume that if they had the ark with them, they had power over God to make him fight for their side. David knows that is not the case. He knows that he has sinned, and that if the Lord so chose, he could remove David’s throne. So he acknowledges the sovereignty of God and gives no appearance of having any power over him by taking his ark into exile. Nevertheless, David does use this opportunity to establish a communication network in Jerusalem. He enlists Zadok and Abiathar, together with their sons Ahimaaz and Jonathan, as spies who will remain in Jerusalem and report to him about Absalom’s doings. The grace of God remains on David by giving him loyal servants among the priests in Jerusalem.

The third encounter is with Hushai the Archite (15:30-37). Notice how this encounter comes about. As David made it to the summit of the Mount of Olives, weeping along with all those who were with him, he received a punch to the gut in verse 31: “And it was told David, ‘Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.’” As if things weren’t already bad enough, David now gets the news that his MVP is playing for the other team. What does a man feeling the weight of his own sin under the hand of the Lord’s discipline do in this situation? David prayed: “And David said to the LORD, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness” (v. 31). Now notice the very next verse: “While David was coming to the summit, where God was worshiped, behold, Hushai the Archite came to meet him with his coat torn and dirt on his head.” Hushai’s arrival is the beginning of the answer to David’s prayer. David convinces Hushai not to go with him but to return to Jerusalem and work his way into Absalom’s confidence so that he can combat Ahithophel’s influence and hopefully defeat his counsel.

I just want to point out here that David does not turn away from the Lord when he finds himself in a seemingly hopeless predicament due to his own sin. He turns to the Lord in prayer. And the answer to his prayer shows up immediately. It reminds me of the Lord’s promise in Isaiah 65:24: “Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.” Brothers and sisters, you must never allow the darkness of suffering and guilt to suffocate your ability to seek the Lord in prayer. Whatever you may be experiencing, so long as Jesus Christ is your advocate with the Father, you have the right and privilege to appeal to your Father in heaven and know that he will answer you in his love. And how often do we underestimate his ability to respond with help even from the very moment that we ask! David’s second journey into the wilderness is painful, but it is also full of grace.

And that brings us to the next chapter and the next movement in the story:

### **3. Escalation against the Lord’s anointed (ch. 16)**

Here we see the narrative tension rise as opposition to David intensifies. Chapter 16 gives us an account of three characters. Two of them directly encounter David as he comes down the Mount of Olives and then goes on to Bahurim, and one of them is with Absalom in Jerusalem. As we move through the accounts of these three characters we move along from bad to worse as the opposition to David escalates to a decisive moment. Let’s note who these three characters are.

The first one is Ziba (16:1-4), whom we encountered previously in chapter 9. Ziba had been a servant of King Saul, and David had appointed him to manage Saul’s estate that had passed to Saul’s grandson Mephibosheth. You may recall that Mephibosheth was crippled, and David welcomed him into his own home in fulfillment of his promise of loyalty to Jonathan, Mephibosheth’s father. It was that Ziba who came out to meet David with donkeys loaded up with provisions for the journey for David’s men. Now that sounds like a good thing, and of course it was a blessing from the Lord to provide for David’s men at a time of need. But notice the conversation between David and Ziba in 16:3-4: “And the king said, ‘And where is your master’s son [i.e., Mephibosheth]?’ Ziba said to the king, ‘Behold, he remains in Jerusalem, for he said, “Today the house of Israel will give me back the kingdom of my father.”’ Then the king said to Ziba, ‘Behold, all that belonged to Mephibosheth is now yours.’ And Ziba said, ‘I pay homage; let me ever find favor in your sight, my lord the king.’” At first that sounds like Mephibosheth, who has received only kindness from David, has now betrayed him. But as we

will come to find out in chapter 19, Ziba is lying to take advantage of David at a vulnerable moment. Ziba is not an ally of Absalom, but he is a manipulator looking out for himself.

But then the situation escalates in the next encounter with a man named Shimei in the town of Bahurim (16:5-14). Shimei belongs to the family of Saul, and he takes this opportunity to curse David, throw stones at him and his men, and fling dust at them. He tells David that what he is suffering is payback for his actions against the house of Saul. David knows that is not true because he did not sin against the house of Saul, and yet he does not allow his men to kill Shimei to stop his cursing. Notice David's words in 16:11-12: "And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, 'Behold, my own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite! Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. It may be that the LORD will look on the wrong done to me, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing today.'" David sees Shimei's misguided cursing as discipline from the Lord. So he accepts the curses and the rocks willingly, entrusting himself to the will of his Father.

But the highest point of escalation in this story comes in the remaining verses of chapter 16 (vv. 15-23), and it is focused on the character Ahithophel, Absalom's new counselor. First we read that David's friend Hushai the Archite, having returned to Jerusalem, maneuvers his way into Absalom's confidence. But right after that we discover how difficult a task it will be for Hushai to undermine Ahithophel, because Ahithophel's first word of advice to Absalom proves to be politically shrewd and effective. Once Absalom has settled into the royal residence in Jerusalem, we read in 16:21, "Ahithophel said to Absalom, 'Go in to your father's concubines, whom he has left to keep the house, and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself a stench to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened.'" And so Absalom did. He had a tent set up on the very same roof where David had previously spotted Bathsheba bathing, and one-by-one, in full view of the people of Israel, he took his father's concubines into the tent to lie with them. Think about how wicked an act this was. The Law of Moses clearly forbade a man from sleeping with his father's wife (Lev. 18:8; 20:11), and here Absalom did it ten times over! And not only that, he did it publicly because he was proud of this act.

It was indeed morally evil, but it was politically effective. It communicated to all those who had sided with Absalom that he had now pushed all his chips to the middle of the table. There would be no backing down now, no hope of ever reconciling with his father. Absalom had started a coup that he now had to finish. And that's not even to mention the humiliation of King David in this act. It made David appear weak, unable to defend his own home. Seeing this, the people who had aligned with Absalom were galvanized in their support of him, strengthening his ability to lead this insurrection. This is the lowest point of these chapters for King David, the moment when he appears to be at his weakest. And let's not forget that it all came to pass by the decree of the Lord. Speaking through Nathan the prophet in 12:11-12: "And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun." We must affirm two biblical truths here: (1) Absalom's act was wicked, detestable to God, and (2) in his providence, God brought this act to pass according to his Word. Don't deny either truth, but let them stand together as they always do in Scripture.

So Ahithophel has made his first move in the war against David, and it was a serious blow to David. It sets us up for what is coming in the next chapter:

#### **4. A turning point for the Lord's anointed (ch. 17)**

Chapter 17 brings us to a turning point in the story, a showdown between the counsel of Ahithophel, David's enemy, and that of Hushai, David's friend and spy in Absalom's inner circle. Ahithophel advised Absalom on his next steps: "Let me take a force of 12,000 men and chase down David tonight. I will catch him while he is weary and discouraged, his supporters will flee, and I can strike down him alone. Once he is gone, his supporters will abandon the cause, and I will bring them back here where you can welcome them into your service." It was a plan for a quick strike with a relatively light force on the one narrow target of the king himself. It was actually a very good plan.

But then Absalom asked to hear from Hushai, who offered a different plan: "Your father is an expert in war, so you're not going to be able to find him easily. And if your forces meet stiff resistance, they may abandon you at the first sign of difficulty. So gather up a large, overwhelming force from all Israel, and lead them into battle yourself. You will so utterly overwhelm David's forces that they won't stand a chance. If they flee to a city for refuge, we will raze it the ground." Hushai proposed a plan that would buy David more time to organize and defend himself, and he sold it to Absalom by appealing to his vanity and his desire for revenge. Unlike Ahithophel's plan, Hushai's plan put Absalom at the center of the action, and it was a plan for all-out war against David's supporters, not just David himself. When presented with these two options, what did Absalom choose? Verse 14, the theological center of this story, tells us: "And 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 defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring harm upon Absalom." This verse demonstrates the truth of Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." It is a testimony to the sovereignty of God over Absalom, but also to the steadfast love of God for David. David had prayed for the Lord to turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness, and at this major turning point in the story, that is exactly what the Lord has done. From here on out, everything will flow in David's direction. His Father truly loves him.

There are three short narratives right after this showdown between the two counselors, all of which flow in David's favor. One is the effectiveness of David's communication network in verses 15-22, where Hushai sends warning to Zadok and Abiathar, who in turn communicate that to their sons Jonathan and Ahimaaz, who then deliver that warning to David. You can read the details of that story, but I just want to note that in carrying out their mission as spies for David, Jonathan and Ahimaaz end up hiding in a well under the protection of a woman of Bahurim who acts very similar to Rahab in the story of Israel's spies in the city of Jericho in Joshua 2. The author wants us to hear the echoes of that story here to show that the Lord is with David as he had formerly been with Joshua. At the end of the chapter (vv. 27-29) we see the Lord providing much-needed supplies for David and his men when they reach their destination, the city of Mahanaim, where David will set up a temporary headquarters. But between those two stories, notice what the author tells us in verse 23: "When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order and hanged himself, and he died and was buried in the tomb of his father." Ahithophel was a shrewd man. He could see that a turning point had come, and it was now only a matter of time before

Absalom's rebellion came to an end. Rather than face execution for his treason against King David, he decided to end his own life. All the wicked schemes against the Lord's anointed are now unraveling, and when we come to chapters 18-20 we will see how this story concludes.

Now that we have had an opportunity to walk through this story, how does it speak into our lives? Here is a word of application: **Do not mistake the Lord's discipline for hatred, but receive it in the security of his love for you in Christ.**

David was disciplined by the Lord for his sins, but he was never disowned as a son. He was driven out into the wilderness, he was deprived of 200 of his servants, he was opposed by his most capable advisor, and he was humiliated by his own son, all in fulfillment of the Lord's word through Nathan the prophet. But he was never hated or opposed by the Lord. David did not experience a single moment outside the security of God's love and promise to him. All that came upon him was ultimately for his good, to magnify to him the weight of his sin and thus to magnify to him the glory of the God against whom David had sinned. And even if we experience terrible pain in the process, learning to see more clearly and feel more deeply the weight of the glory of God is always, always, always good for us.

We who are God's children should expect discipline from the Lord, and we must interpret it rightly when it comes. Through all the sufferings and adversity we face, the Lord's discipline comes to us in two different ways. Sometimes we experience the Lord's formative discipline. By "formative discipline," I mean discipline that does not come in response to any specific sin on our part. It is simply suffering we endure from the Lord's hand that is designed to shape us more into the image of Christ as we learn more how to call out to the Lord and to trust him in our time of need.

But there is also corrective discipline. This is discipline from the Lord that is clearly the consequence of sins we have committed. If you have health problems related to drugs or alcohol abuse or to promiscuous sexual activity, you are experiencing consequences for sin. If you have financial difficulties because of a gambling addiction, you are experiencing the consequences of sin. If you wreck your marriage by committing adultery, you are experiencing the consequences of sin. Like David, we may experience the Lord's corrective discipline for specific sinful acts we have committed.

What this story tells us is that, when we experience the Lord's discipline, we must interpret it the way God tells us to: as the loving act of a Father for his son or daughter. In the fog of your suffering and guilty feelings, you must not believe the lie of your enemy: "God hates you. You have messed up too badly this time. You are beyond hope. The only thing you can do now is hide. Push God away. Run from him. Protect yourself from ever facing him because you have no hope." That is a lie from the pit of Hell. Answer it with the truth of 1 John 2:1-2: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." In moments of darkness, your feelings do not determine what is real. The objective truth of the Word of God determines what is real. That Word tells us that if Christ is your advocate with the Father, then your sins are forgiven, and the heart of God toward you is the heart of a loving Father whose love for you is

the very same unfailing love that he has for his own Son, Jesus Christ. If you are in the wilderness like David, look around you for signs of grace, tokens of the steadfast love of the Lord that never failed David, and that will not fail you who are in Christ.

David is not the last character in the Bible to cross the Brook Kidron and ascend the Mount of Olives in a time of distress, to be cursed by enemies he refused to answer, or to be betrayed by a friend who eventually came to despair and hanged himself. This story points us beyond David to the Lord's Anointed, Jesus Christ, the Son of God who endured unimaginable affliction from the Lord, not because he had sinned, but because we had sinned. Bearing our sins, he died under condemnation that we deserved, and he was raised again on the third day so that in him we might become sons of God, forever secure in the love of our Father. Amen.