

When Kings Go Out to Battle

DAVID enters, sits, and falls asleep. He awakens quickly, mumbling, alarmed.

David: What a fool I was to have trusted him. I so longed for a reconciliation that I put my better judgement aside. Then he began parading around the countryside in a chariot led by fifty footmen, publicly announcing himself as the rightful heir to the throne—*politicking* for the job—positioning himself at the city gate, bowing and kissing the hand of anyone who came with a complaint to be placed before the king. Then, surprisingly, he came to me and sought my blessing to move to Hebron, telling me that he had made a vow “to worship the Lord in Hebron.” I didn’t hesitate and told him, “Go in peace.” I wanted him gone!

He had hardly settled in, when true to his duplicitous nature, a messenger brought me word that he was crafting a conspiracy ... the nervous messenger, mumbling, looking down, telling me, “Ah ... ah ... ah ... A ... A ... Ahithophel has gone to Hebron to serve your son, my Lord.” My closest counselor, whom I considered an oracle of God, had left me, and put his public approval upon the insurrection!

“Everyone, move, now!” I shouted, echoing down the palace hallways. “We must flee, or they will kill us all!”

Taking what we could quickly gather, we set out on foot, heading east to the Jordan River, with all my household following me, weeping, wondering if we would ever see the city again. As we crossed the Kidron Valley, I stood, like a stone sentinel, watching my sons and wives and friends and brave soldiers march past me. The enemy would gather thousands to pursue us, many who had served beside me in battle. Now it would be six-hundred Philistines, *Philistines*, who had befriended me when I was fleeing from a Saul-gone-mad, who would protect me with their very lives. “March on,” I told them. “March on.”

As we crossed the valley to the Mount of Olives, the Levites who were carrying the ark, along with my two priests, Zadok and Abiathar, carefully set the ark down and offered sacrifices until all who were leaving had left the city. I stood and stared at the ark. The ark that had escorted our people out of exile, leading the procession through the Sinai, across the Jordan into Canaan—the promised land. The ark containing the two stone tablets of the covenant, placed there by Moses at Hebron, commanding God’s people, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” The ark we had carried into battle, assuring us of God’s favor, and that had graced our altars of praise at Mt. Ebal, Bethel, and Shiloh. The same ark I had danced around before the Lord with all my might—*rapturously* so, but shamelessly, according to

my wife, Michal, exposing myself in full view of my servants' maids as we joyously carried the ark into Jerusalem, dancing, leaping to the shouts of praise and the blasts of trumpets, placing the ark in the center of our tented tabernacle.

I stared at the ark and knew at that moment it was not ours to possess—it was the ark of God—for *all* the people of Israel.

“Take the ark of God back into the city,” I told Zadok. “If I find favor in the Lord’s eyes, he will bring me back and let me see it and his dwelling place again. But if he says, ‘I am not pleased with you,’ then let him do to me whatever seems good to him.”

As we climbed the Mount of Olives, I felt every moment of my sixty years, my once battle-field-tested bones now brittle, crackling with age. Weeping, I walked bare-footed, my head covered in sorrow.

If only you had known him. He was as tall and straight and strong as the cedars of Lebanon, with a beautiful face and complexion without blemish, and this mane of thick, black, luxurious hair his crowning glory. Of all my sons, he was the most charming and the craftiest ... Absalom ... my son ... fit for battle, eager for the warfare he hoped would kill his father. What had I done, not done, for it to come to this? Such evil all around me ... malice, abuse ... threats and lies ... avarice, power ... bloodthirsty and deceitful men—betrayal! —my closest confidant, Ahithophel, whom I broke bread with, worshipped with in the temple, his speech smooth as butter, while deceit stirred in his heart! “It is my companion who attacks me, my closest friend! Lord, I pray you, turn Ahithophel’s counsel into foolishness!”

At first ... at first ... there on the Mount of Olives ... I thought it was an apparition ... a robe ... torn open ... a head covered in the dust of the earth ... a face ... stained with tears ... and then ... and then ... he bent down ... took my hands ... and lifted me up—it was Hushai—a friend, a *faithful* friend and counselor, who had not abandoned me!

“Return to the city,” I told him at once. “Return to Jerusalem and say to Absalom, ‘I will be your servant; even as I have been your father’s servant in time past.’ Then, whatever news you hear in the king’s house, tell it to the priests Zadok and Abiathar, and their sons will relay everything you have heard to me.” And Hushai did as I asked.

We left the Mount and departed for the Jordan. Word soon came from our young couriers, Ahimaaz and Jonathan, to cross the river immediately, otherwise we would be swallowed up by Absalom’s forces. Under the cover of night, we set out—women, children, our cattle, supplies, every soldier—slowly crossing the Jordan at its lowest point. Throughout the long night, I stood watch till every man, woman, and child had crossed the river. Surrounded by her attendants, I saw Bathsheba. She looked at me and we both seemed ... lost ... in a shroud of

sadness. As dawn broke, I wondered why I could see no pursuit in the distance? Where were Absalom and Ahithophel and their mighty men who would swallow us up?

Later, I learned that Hushai had been called to court to offer his advice to Absalom, who had already agreed to Ahithophel's advice! To Hushai's astonishment, Absalom and the elders of Israel said, "The advice of Hushai is better than the advice of Ahithophel." Scorned and rejected, Ahithophel saddled his donkey, left Jerusalem, returned to his home in the hill country of Judah, put his house in order and hanged himself. *He had spread a net for my feet and dug a pit in my path but had fallen into it himself.*

The Lord had answered my prayer, giving us the needed time to press eastward the ten miles to Mahanaim, "the camp of God," as named by Jacob. Soon, though, Absalom and all the mighty men of Israel, it seemed, were crossing the Jordan in rapid pursuit.

We chose the forest of Ephraim to take our stand. I appointed three lead commanders: a third of the troops would be under the command of Ittai the Gittite; a third under Abishai, Joab's brother; and a third under Joab, who was not pleased with my division of the command, but I had determined that I would be the lead commander. But then, all my advisors and commanders insisted that I stay and give them help and support them from the city, exclaiming, "You are worth ten thousand of us." I was reluctant but knew in my heart that if I were to encounter Absalom in battle, I would rather he slay me than I him. I agreed to remain but gave my commanders this one caveat: "Be gentle with the young man, Absalom, for my sake."

The forest, with its rocks and ravines, shrubs, and mighty oaks, became our ally, preventing Absalom's army from sweeping down upon us. The battle was fierce, with the forest claiming more lives than the sword—the confused enemy scattering, running helter-skelter through the thick woods, as we flanked them with our smaller, more flexible units.

As I was waited for word, sitting between the inner and outer gates of the city, my servant came rushing in, announcing, "My lord the king, hear the good news! The Lord has delivered you today from all who rose up against you."

"Is the young man, Absalom safe," I asked?

"May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you, be like that young man."

He was dead ... I knew my son, Absalom, was dead ... and later was told that while riding his mule, fleeing my men ... my son ... my son's head ... his neck ... his hair was caught up in the thick branches of a giant oak, his mule running off, leaving him hanging there—dangling midair—between heaven and earth. Not a man touched him, even as I had ordered, until Joab ... Joab came and thrust three

spears into the lad's heart ... while he was still ... dangling there ... alive in the oak tree.

“O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son! My heart is blighted and withered like the grass; darkness ... darkness ... my closest friend.”

Joab, again, it was Joab, who came uninvitedly into my chamber where, in sorrow, I had retreated.

“You have humiliated all your men,” he said to me, “who have just saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters and the lives of your wives and concubines. You love those who hate you and hate those who love you. You have made it clear today that the commanders and their men mean nothing to you. I see that you would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all of us were dead.”

And then, as if I were a mere foot soldier, he ordered me, “Now go out and encourage your men! I swear by the Lord that if you don't go out, not a man will be left with you by nightfall. It will be worse for you than *all* the calamities that have come upon you from your youth till now.”

He was right. Absent the joy that accompanies victory, my men were dispirited and would soon abandon their allegiance to me, setting the stage for a civil war. If Absalom had not been slain, the house of David would have been divided forever, with brother pitted against brother, tribe against tribe. I had to do something, for that is what we kings do ... we do ... something.

I left the chamber and took a seat on a make-shift throne in the gateway where the men had gathered and stood before me. A hush fell upon us as I rose and spoke in what was little more than a whisper, which pierced through the still air, amplified by the hard stones of the walled city.

“No king is saved by the size of his army. The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those who hope in his unfailing love. If the Lord had *not* been on our side—let Israel say—if the Lord had *not* been on our side when men attacked us, when their anger flared against us, they would have swallowed us alive; the flood would have engulfed us...the raging waters would have swept us away. Praise be to the Lord...we have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare...our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. March on, march on!”

We left the camp of God, crossed over the Jordan and journeyed home. As we crested the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, my city, came into view. It was nothing more than a country outpost when I became king. We had fought for it, fortified it, building it into a bustling city for all the tribes of Judea and Israel ... a spiritual citadel for a united Israel, and a resting place, at last, for the ark of the covenant.

The Lord has fulfilled his purpose for me. I will never again go out with my men, in spring, when kings go out to battle. This old warrior-king can barely lift his staff let alone his sword ... I'm exhausted ... cold to the bone ... I can't keep warm, even when they kindle the fire and put more covers on me. They ... they ... my ... my servants, they brought me this young virgin to take care of me ... lie beside me to keep me warm—Abishag is her name. She is lovely, waits on me day and night ... sweetly so, but I ... I ... I have nothing to do with her ... my senses have grown dull, no appetite for pleasure ... how quickly ... how quickly ... it all ... fades.

Perhaps ... perhaps someday, there will come out of the House of David one who will bring ... peace to our land. Not a warrior-king, but a ... a Prince of Peace. But now ... I long to rest ... and be with the Lord ... who is ... *my shepherd* ... *I shall not want*.

DAVID falls asleep.

Selah

A note to the reader: This dramatic monologue is taken from a larger, one-person play entitled, *The Odyssey of King David*, written by D. Paul Thomas. In this abbreviated version prepared for The Indianapolis Literary Club, nearly all stage directions have been deleted while ellipses have been indulgently retained to reflect the actor's mind and subsequent speech pattern. All scriptural references have been taken from either the King James Bible or the New International Version translation. The author has taken the liberty of paraphrasing scripture frequently, particularly from the Book of Psalms.

