



# THE WORST POSSIBLE “GOOD NEWS”

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

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2 Samuel 17:24-19:8  
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At Christmas time we think of the angels descending from heaven to earth, breaking in on the shepherds in Bethlehem with the announcement: “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you *good news* of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11). Hearing the words “good news” (gospel), the shepherds were overcome with emotion. The term was rich with meaning which sprang from the Old Testament stories. But, because oftentimes we are unaware of that context, we lack the appropriate emotional response that the gospel brings.

The background and context of the “good news” is a battle scene. It begins with a rebellion and the exile of the true king. A battle is fought, victory is secured, messengers run from battlefield to the city of the king, announcing the victory as “good news.” The news was heard first, by the watchmen on the city walls. They announced it to the city, and everyone was overcome with joy that their God reigned. Today, we come to the place in the David story where that exact framework of the gospel is laid out. But what is unique about this text is that we see from the father’s perspective how the good news impacts him, especially when he learns that the price of victory is the death of his son.

Following the rebellion of Absalom, his son, David was exiled to the desert. At last he has safely arrived in Mahanaim.<sup>1</sup> While Absalom puts on an elaborate coronation ceremony for himself in Jerusalem, David organizes himself for battle.<sup>2</sup>

## I. Assembly for War (18:1-5)

**Then David numbered the people who were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. And David sent the people out, one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai the son of Zeruah, 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. And 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)**

With the battle now imminent, David numbers his

troops and divides them into three divisions, each commanded by a general: Joab shares the command with his brother Abishai and his newest disciple and loyal friend, Ittai the Gittite. After he organizes the troops, David expresses a strong desire to personally direct the battle in the field. He does not want to stay home. We are reminded, ever so painfully, that his staying home from the battle years earlier (2 Sam 11:1) set in motion the terrible sins of adultery, murder, rape, more murder, insurrection, and finally, exile. David is not about to make that mistake again. But his troops object to having their aged king exposed to the heat of battle. His presence would place them in great jeopardy, so they request that he play his role as commander-in-chief from the city. David submits to their counsel and directs the battle at home from “beside the gate.” This is a well placed counter by the narrator to the memory of Absalom, who stood “beside the gate” (2 Sam. 15:2) to steal away the hearts of Israel from his father.

Once the troops are numbered they are paraded before the king. In the middle of the ceremony, David blurts out the impassioned plea: “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” Here we see the real reason behind David’s request to lead the battle in person. He feels that victory is in the air, but he cannot bear the thought of what victory might cost: the death of his son. Death, of course, is the sentence that his son’s blatant treason deserves, but it is a sentence from which his father’s heart recoils. David’s words ring out with the piercing clarity of a church bell at high noon. Not one of the assembled troops failed to appreciate the desire of this father’s heart. But the king’s command fills the air with a new tension. How can restoration occur without justice?

And now the battle. Verse 12:

## II. The Battle (18:6-18)

**Then the people went out into the field against Israel, and the battle took place in the forest of Ephraim. And 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. (18:6-8)**

David has arranged for the battle to be fought in the forested lands of Ephraim, where the terrain would work in favor of his own outmanned forces. The result is a rout of Absalom’s army, with tremendous loss of life. The dense forest and the panic of battle sends Absalom’s confused soldiers running in all directions until they became hopelessly disoriented and finally, ravaged. The Transjordan countryside which feeds David’s men (17:24-29), devours the men of Absalom.

Next, the narrator moves from the fate of the army to

the fate of their leader.

**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. (18:9)**

Just as the mass of the Israelite army is liquidated by a forest, their leader is “liquidated by an individual tree, the size of which is both the symbol and the ironic negation of Absalom’s pride.”<sup>3</sup> By chance, Absalom is spotted by David’s men. Fokkelman describes the scene: “Through his great dread of the soldiers, he pays too little attention to the surroundings, so that he does not stoop in time to avoid the low-hanging tangle of boughs.”<sup>4</sup> Ironically the dumb animal keeps trotting on, unaware that his departure has left the would-be king helplessly suspended between heaven and earth. At one moment he is seated on his princely mount, at the next, he is suspended helpless. “‘Losing his mule Absalom has lost his kingdom’ (Conroy)...Suspended ‘between heaven and earth,’ the mortal Absalom fails to achieve either, fulfillment of his life on earth, as a prince or king, and the transcendent dimension of existence, heaven, the kingdom of God. ‘Between heaven and earth’ means that he has become a nowhere man. His pride, his ambition and his rebelliousness—in short, his ego—have brought him to a point where he is no longer in control. His bid for power has removed the ground from beneath his feet and led to complete impotence.”<sup>5</sup>

The scene gives the reader a touch of the humor of divine justice. A spoiled son, deprived of nothing, whose glory was his hair, whose ambition was the throne, so royally seated on his princely ass, is now deprived of both, by means of his donkey and his hair.

What follows (vv 10-18) is a heated exchange between an unnamed soldier who spies Absalom’s helpless condition, and Joab. The soldier reports to Joab what he has seen, only to be met by the general’s fury that he did not kill Absalom. When the youth reminds the general of the king’s clear command, Joab loses patience. He grabs three spears and flings them right at the heart of Absalom, dislodging him from the tree. Ten of Joab’s attendants finish off the helpless usurper. They throw his body into a pit and cover it with stones, a memorial to his dishonorable death. Thus Joab “assumes a king’s responsibility for the State, which in his opinion David neglects or, as a sentimental father, is unable to bear.”<sup>6</sup>

A would-be usurper of the crown, Absalom dies with no legacy, no son, and no house of his own, only a self-made monument to his vainglory.

Meanwhile, on the battlefield, the good news of victory is carried by messengers to the waiting king. Normally, such a report of messengers carrying good news is dispensed within a few lines of information, but here the narrator gives almost twenty times that amount of detail so as to give us pause and allow us a glimpse into a father’s psyche and the anxious feelings that are assailing him.

### III. Messengers of “Good News” (18:19-32)

**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. (18:19-23)**

Following the victory, Ahimaaz, Zadok’s son, once the messenger of bad news, can’t wait to volunteer for this role again—only now as an enthusiastic messenger of “good news.” But the naive youth has no idea of the impact this good news will have on a waiting father. Initially, Joab refuses the youth’s request, insisting that a foreigner with no emotional ties to the king is better suited to deliver this terrible good news. However, after repeated requests by Ahimaaz, Joab condescends and allows him to tag along as a second runner.

Verse 24:

**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. And 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.” And 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.”**

**And Ahimaaz called and said to the king, “All is well (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.” And the king said, “Is it well (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.**

**And 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 (shalom) 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!” (18:24-32)**

Pitched with adrenaline and excitement, Ahimaaz outruns the foreigner and is first to arrive at the city. David is “sitting between two gates”—a graphic description of a king delicately perched between two destinies, one of victory and restoration, the other of defeat and permanent exile. As the messengers arrive, we get an insight into Da-

vid's psyche. His role as a distraught father has completely overshadowed his role as king and head of state. The lens he uses to interpret information from the battle is a narrow one at best, and completely one sided. He interprets everything through the grid of the "good news" he so longs to hear—the only news that he will permit himself to hear.

The sight of Ahimaaz evokes good memories for David. The king is heartened with his word of "*Shalom*," which resonates with his son's name, Absalom, giving David the impetus to interpret the messenger's arrival as good news. Ahimaaz "thinks that he is addressing a king, but it is only the father who is listening."<sup>7</sup> After making the initial announcement, the realization finally sinks in to the naive youth that he is talking to Absalom's father, a father whose only desire is not the "good news" of the battle, but the "good news" that his son is well (*shalom*). Ahimaaz avoids the issue. Choking back his words with an evasive, "I saw...ah...a commotion...but I don't know what...uh ...", he stands aside, hoping to buy some time until the Cushite arrives with what Ahimaaz now realizes is terrible news.

When the Cushite arrives, this second messenger announces good news: "You, O King, are free from all!" Good news for the head of state, but disconcerting news for the waiting father. An anxious David probes further: "Is it *shalom* with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answers in terms of David's role as king, not as father, stating in no uncertain terms that this young man, the treacherous rebel, is dead, but he carefully avoids using his name and the word death. Finally, the father knows that the price of restoring the kingdom and the penalty for treason is the life of the son—a son hung on a tree.

What follows is one of the most poignant scenes in Biblical narrative.

#### IV. The Impact of Terrible "Good News" (18:33-19:8)

**And 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!"**

**Then it was told Joab, "Behold, the king is weeping and mourns for Absalom." And the victory that day was turned to mourning for all the people, for the people heard it said that day, "The king is grieved for his son." So the people went by stealth into the city that day, as people who are humiliated steal away when they flee in battle. And the king covered his face and cried out with a loud voice, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (18:33-19:4)**

The news of Absalom's death hits David with an explosion of pain that buries his soul in sorrow. He rises to escape public view and climbs a stairway to a chamber above the gate, seeking to be alone. Walled in by isolation, he paces back and forth like a wounded animal, and with agonizing cries unleashes his consummate grief:

*O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!  
Would I had died instead of you,  
O Absalom, my son, my son!"*

David's poignant cry takes the shape of a poet's lament,

one that is dense with pathos. It is made up mostly of nouns, all linked with but one verb. The first and last lines have but two different words (*beni*: "my son," and *Absalom*: "father of peace"). These are everyday terms—son, father, peace—but they are powerful words which resonate with emotion. Each carries both images of the father and the son and links them with what ought to have been... peace, peace, peace. In the center is a father's atoning wish to have taken his son's place in death. The poem powerfully draws these two estranged men face to face and unites them at every level with intimate touch, wholeness, and a well being that is dreamlike. But reality has shattered the dream, and now silence screams from a son's grave. Thus that five-fold repetition of "my son" rings out a lifetime of emotion for David's failings as a father.

From a father who suddenly loses a son due to an accident, war or for whatever cause, the exclamation 'had I but died in your place!' is moving, understandable and sound, but in the mouth of this father who has not the courage required for drastic remedies in connection with such an incorrigible spoiled son, the same exclamation is quite different, a sign of pure self-torment.<sup>8</sup>

Contrasting David's sorrow on this occasion with the sorrow that he felt during his ascent up the Mount of Olives, Fokkelman points out that on the Mount, David was in the role of a king mourning the loss of his throne. Politically and emotionally, he was realistic and adequate through his trust. He was himself, he was whole and able to reach out and embrace others in healthy relationships. But now, at the Mahanaim gate, David is in the role of a father mourning the loss of his son. He is governed by illusions which lead to disillusion and a one-sided view of reality. Being self absorbed, he is inadequate to cope. The wholeness he once exhibited is now split by too great an identification with his son. This leaves him alone, and isolated from relationships.<sup>9</sup>

David's self-absorbed sorrow weighs heavily on the entire city and drags it down into the pit that he occupies. Victory is tinged with blackness; jubilation is drowned out by silence. Each citizen, once consumed in full-throated praise, now secretly slips out of the celebration as if their joy had made them unclean. The isolation into which David withdraws, when his soldiers have spent their lives to save his crown, is intolerable. Action is demanded.

Alarmed and outraged, Joab intervenes. He breaks into David's womb of isolation and confronts him with manly force to shake him and awake him and drag him out of his pit of despair. Verse 5:

**Then Joab came into the house to the king and said, "Today you have covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who today have saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters, the lives of your wives, and the lives of your concubines, by loving those who hate you, and by hating those who love you. For you have shown today that princes and servants are nothing to you; for I know this day that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants, for I swear by the Lord if you do not go out, surely not a man will pass the night with you, and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now." (19:5-7)**

The scene ends in verse 8, with a compliant father bowing to the bidding of his general and returning to his honored role of king, reluctant though he may be. David descends the chamber and puts on his public face where he can mask the pain and play the game that protocol demands. He takes his place in the receiving line and extends his quivering hand to everyone with what probably amounted to a wet handshake. The narrator has made his point: David's role as father had overshadowed his role as messianic king, and as such, placed the kingdom of God in great jeopardy. The God of Abraham has appeared again in history to demand his exacting price for a "good news" that will not be cheapened by easy sentimentality. The narrator has painted Joab, who clearly disobeyed the king's command, as a better servant of the kingdom than David, because Joab was willing to deal head on, without compromise, with the grim realities. This is a telling tale for fathers who can become so attached to their offspring that they lose sight of the highest good. Most of us would respond like David. Rare is the father like Abraham, who in obedience lay his son on the altar of sacrifice.

The story leaves us with a warning, and captures us with wonder at a perspective of the gospel that we do not see anywhere else. Here the focus is on a father's grief, and we see that, from his perspective, the "good news" is the worst possible news. I remember how comforting this text was for me when as a father, I lost a son. I used David's words to articulate my own grief:

*O my son David, my son, my son,  
would I had died instead of you!*

Observing this perspective of a father's grief in the David story, we would come to expect it in the Jesus story. But surprisingly, it is absent. Why is it, I wonder, when we come to the Jesus story, our Emmanuel, our Dayspring, the climactic *good news* of history, we are drawn into the story from everyone's point of view except the Father's? When the angel appears to Mary, we sing her song. When Joseph hears his wife is with child, we experience his unbelief. When the angels break through the night sky to announce good news to the shepherds, we are struck by their fear. As the star appears in the East and kings journey to Bethlehem, we walk with them. When Joseph and Mary present Jesus at the temple, and Simeon and Anna catch sight of him, we are drawn with them into Israel's most sacred visitation. But where is the Father's perspective in the story? It is totally eclipsed.

What did the Father feel when he committed his Son over to human flesh? What was it like to relinquish control of a Son to be raised by mere teenagers with no experience as parents? More fearful yet, what pain swept his soul when the Son was given over to a career of rejection within Israel? Jesus was no captain of the football team. He was no thriving success. He was a "man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." What terror gripped his soul in the final hour when he was handed over to hell itself, whose forces impaled him on that tree and he hung suspended between heaven and earth, a nowhere man? What was it like for the Father to see his Son in the place of Barabbas, who was, in fact, an Absalom, a revolutionary seeking to take over the kingdom by force? What did he feel when the Son uttered the agonized cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" He hung there, not by his hair, but suspended by his veins, until a spear pierced his heart. What grief did the Father feel as he looked over horizon's rim, and gasped. Did he not crawl up into his chamber, in isolation, and cry, like Absalom's father,

*"My son Jesus, my son, my son Jesus,  
Would I had died instead of you,  
O Jesus, my son, my son!"*

Perhaps this is the allusion we long for, but we are privy to neither words nor voice, only the sight of the heavens turning black as death's dark shadows are put to flight. What Father is this who carries the deepest sorrow in his bosom, sorrow suffered because of me, and never displays it in front of me? He never holds his grief over us but hides it, that we may be drawn by love alone to that wondrous tree where he contemplated, paid, and set us free, to bind one and all, Father Son, until one and all are filled with Peace, for he is our Ab shalom!

1. Mahanaim means "two camps" after Jacob's experience there when he witnessed angels camped around him (Gen 32:2). It is a foreshadowing of David's victory.

2. I have depended heavily on the classic work of J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 232-297, for many of my insights in this scene.

3. Fokkelman, *King David*, 241.

4. Fokkelman, *King David*, 243.

5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 242.

6. Fokkelman, *King David*, 246.

7. Fokkelman, *King David*, 257.

8. Fokkelman, *King David*, 263.

9. Fokkelman, *King David*, 262.

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