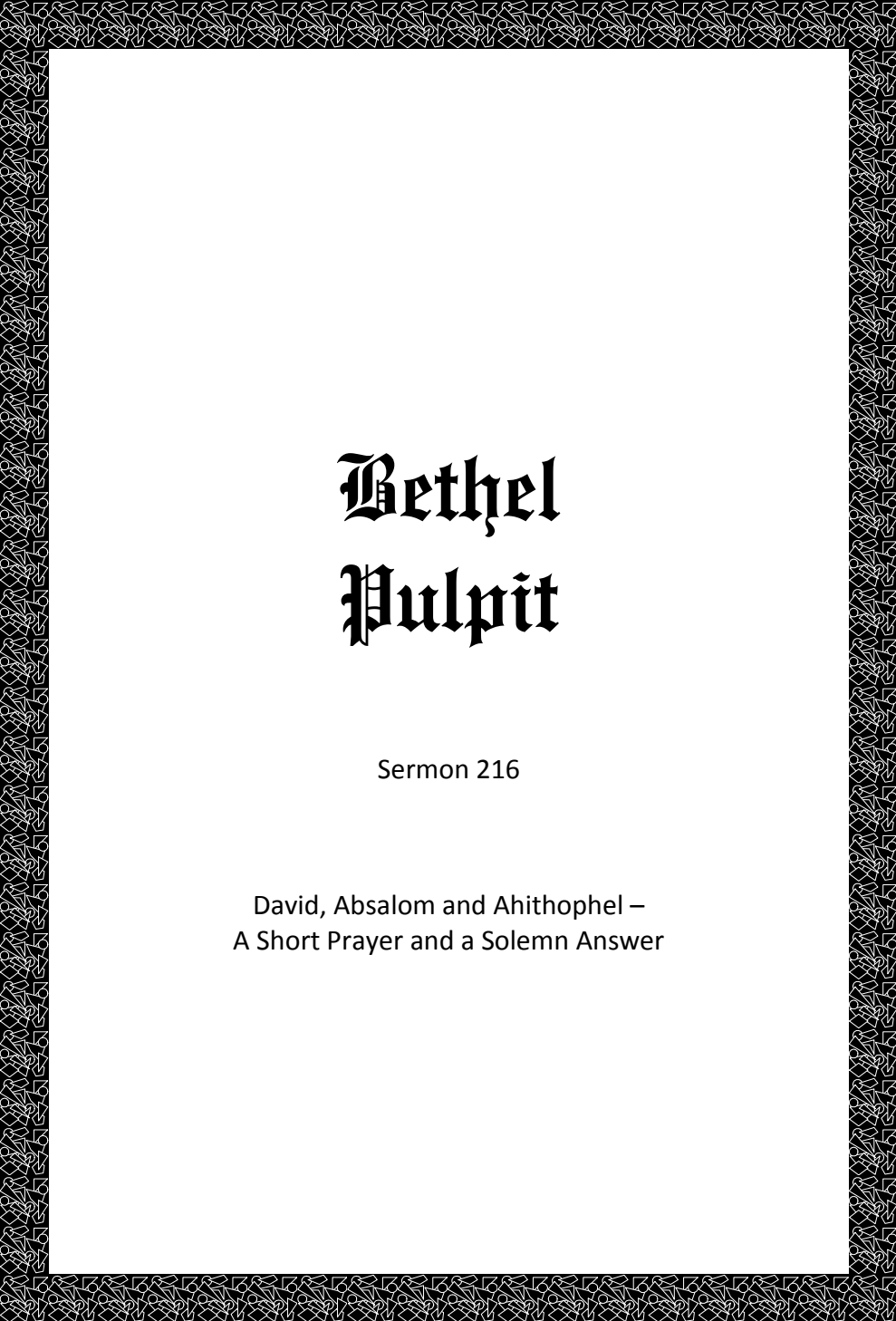




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 216

David, Absalom and Ahithophel –
A Short Prayer and a Solemn Answer

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 1st June, 2003**

Text: “*And David said, O Lord, I pray Thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness*” (2 Samuel 15. 31).

David here was in the depths of trouble. Really, he was a broken-hearted man. His own beloved son Absalom had conspired against him, seizing the kingdom from him, and his one desire at this time was that his father should be slain so that he could be king instead. So David with a broken heart leaves Jerusalem and flees.

But beloved friends, with David it was not just that. It was not just the depth of his sorrow. It was not just the depth of his trouble. He realised he deserved it. He realised he had brought it on himself. He realised he was suffering for his sin. He realised he was under the chastening hand of God. Now that was the aggravation of David's deep sorrow at this time. He knew he had procured this trouble; he had brought it on himself; he deserved it. David could never forget that solemn day when he fell so badly, when he committed adultery with Bathsheba, and he could never forget that awful scheme which was really murder that led to the death of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. Though his sins were mercifully forgiven, God told him that the rest of his life would be a life of sorrow, and now David was proving it. Let us be very clear, the testimony of God's Word never changes from beginning to end, that *sin always brings sorrow* – with the wicked, eternally in hell; with the Lord's people under the chastening hand of their God. Because if you are a child of God, and if you sin, and if you backslide, and if you become hard, and if you turn from God, and if you act wrongly, then the Lord will chasten you. It will not be in judicial anger; it will not be in penal wrath. That is for ever put away at Calvary. O but the severity of the chastening hand of God! David knew that was it. He had a broken heart, but he knew the Lord had promised him this trouble, and he knew he deserved it.

But you see a lot of grace in David. He did not make one complaint. You do not read one single complaint in all this chapter. The depths of sorrow, but not one complaint, not one word of self-justification, not one word of self-pity. This is grace: “But if He thus say, I have no delight in thee; behold, here am I, let Him do to me as seemeth good unto

Him.” That is grace. That is what humble submission is. But with David it went even closer than humble submission. It was complete acquiescence with the will of God. It is He who is too wise to err and too good to be mistaken. “Behold, here am I, let Him do to me as seemeth good unto Him.”

Now David had a very varied career before he was king – the sorrows and trials and wanderings – and then at last he became king, and perhaps he thought his sorrows and trials were over, but he knew greater sorrows after this. Many a child of God, seeking Him, finding Him, blessed with the Saviour’s love, has thought now all would be plain sailing to heaven, yet perhaps they live to prove deeper sorrows, deeper trials than they have ever known before. This was sorrow right in David’s own family, and this was sorrow coming from his own beloved son. You think of it, David’s son, not just turning against him and behaving so evilly towards him, but seeking to slay him. It was that which broke David’s heart, and he realised he deserved it.

But there was another thing, and that was – well to put it in simple, everyday language – David had spoiled Absalom. Absalom was an ungodly boy and an ungodly man, and David did not deal rightly with him. He made excuses for him. He was indulgent with him. Absalom had been guilty of a dreadful murder and David should have seen to the punishment of it, but he excused him and indulged him and pardoned him. He could not bear that any should say anything against his beloved Absalom, and could not bear any should do any harm to his beloved Absalom, and David did not do any good to his beloved Absalom whatsoever. It was cruel the way he treated him. If only he had pointed out his sin, punished him for his misdemeanours. This is one of the great faults in England today, this over-indulgence of children, letting them have their own way. And of course, as always happens, it is creeping into the church of God. There is a solemn admonition to parents to bring up children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” It is no good saying, We have to leave it; we can only pray for them. There are times when you have to reprove and when you have to say, *No*. This over-indulgence is doing no good, either in our country, or in the church of God.

Then this whole point of partiality, David’s partiality to his wicked son Absalom. Mr. F. L. Gosden, not long before he died, said to me that partiality is working havoc in our churches. Well, “we know it is wrong,

but he is a close friend, or a brother, or one of the children.” So there is a different standard than there would be with other people. So things are passed over, and things are not dealt with, and the Lord’s name is not honoured. So David, godly, gracious man that he was, acting wrongly, O but bringing so much sorrow on his head. “Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth.” And David so painfully feeling God’s scourge at this time, and his own beloved Absalom was the one whom God was using as the scourge. Things in anyone’s family cut deep and they come close.

The wonderful thing is that God most blessedly answered David’s prayers in this chapter. That is a wonderful point to me. You may have sinned against God, but He will still answer your prayers. You may be under His chastening hand, but He will still answer your prayers. This trouble you are in – you know, for Satan tells you, and your conscience witnesses, that you brought it on yourself, and you know you deserve it; but the Lord will still answer your prayers. “Upon Him call in humble prayer, thou still art His peculiar care.” The Lord dearly loved David even when he was under His chastening hand, but David had to walk the trial through.

I do not often ask you to do this, but I would like you to turn with me to the third Psalm. I would have read it this morning as part of the reading, only our reading in 2 Samuel was so long. Now the third Psalm, “the security of God’s protection.” We are told at the beginning that David wrote this Psalm “when he fled from Absalom his son.” So really the background of this inspired Psalm is the chapter we read and the things we are considering and talking about at present: David in the depths of trouble; David with a broken heart; Absalom with his army gaining strength hour by hour, coming against David to overthrow him.

Now, “A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.” “Lord, how are they increased that trouble me! many are they that rise up against me. Many there be which say of my soul, There is no help for him in God. Selah.” So people were suggesting that David was in this trouble because God had left him. This temptation, and Satan was whispering, “There is no help for him in God.” Well, they might think it. You might think these things when people are in trouble, but do not say them. When people are in trouble you might think a lot of things, but do not say them. These people here said them. “There is no help for him in God.” Then

comes one of these glorious *but*s. This is David with a broken heart, David with nowhere to lay his head at night, fleeing from Absalom: “But Thou, O Lord, art a shield for me,” his defence, his protection. “My glory, and the Lifter up of mine head.” It is a beautiful expression, that, “The Lifter up of my head.” “I cried unto the Lord with my voice, and He heard me out of His holy hill.” He puts another *Selah* in. Do not rush over it; think about it. In the depths of trouble, self-procured trouble, the chastening hand of God, but still when “I cried unto the Lord ... He heard me.” Now look at verse 5. You think of it, this broken-hearted man. Is it possible he can have a good night’s sleep? “I laid me down and slept; I awaked; for the Lord sustained me. I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people, that have set themselves against me round about. Arise, O Lord; save me, O my God: for Thou hast smitten all mine enemies upon the cheek bone.” You say, David, that is faith, isn’t it? Or is it presumption? You are fleeing. But David seems certain. He speaks as if the victory is secure. “Thou *hast* smitten all mine enemies upon the cheek bone; Thou *hast* broken the teeth of the ungodly.” And this blessed conclusion: “Salvation belongeth unto the Lord.” That is temporal salvation; that is spiritual salvation. It belongs to the Lord. “Thy blessing is upon Thy people. *Selah*.”

Well, we turn back to 2 Samuel 15, and we come to the words: “And one told David, saying, Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.” Now if ever there was a word to strike the dying dead, that was it. “One told David, saying, Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.” Some people seem to love to tell you something bad – Have you heard what has happened? Well, there was one of those here. “And one” – we do not know who he was – “and one told David, saying, Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.” Now who was Ahithophel? There are two answers to that question. First of all, he was David’s counsellor. You would almost say he was prime minister. It seems he was a most brilliant man, a most able man, as a politician, in organising the war. Humanly speaking this was David’s hope of victory, this great man, this outstanding man. It was said, “And the counsel of Ahithophel, which he counselled in those days, was as if a man had enquired at the oracle of God.” It was accounted as the counsel of God. He was so shrewd, so wise, so clever. Well, it was blow upon blow to strike the dying dead. “One told David saying, Ahithophel” – surely not Ahithophel? “Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.”

But the second answer to the question, who was Ahithophel? Well, he was David's bosom friend as well as his counsellor, and David accounted him a most godly man. After the death of Jonathan, there was no-one like Ahithophel. David says, "Mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted." "We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company." These two seemingly-godly men appeared to love one another so dearly. They went together to the house of God. They spoke together of the Lord's dealings, the Lord's blessings.

"And one told David, saying, Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom." I just want to linger here and speak about Ahithophel. He is one of the most solemn characters in the Word of God. He was an apostate. Like King Saul, he seemed so good, so godly, but he was an apostate. Like Judas Iscariot, he seemed so good, so godly, but he was an apostate. You can read about them through Scripture. They seemed so godly. David had no doubt about this man's religion. He said, "We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company." David could not understand it. But we read in the next chapter that Ahithophel committed suicide. He took his own life. This solemn case, this solemn character, Ahithophel. How far a person can go in the things of God and prove to be wrong at last! They are like these beacon warnings you see at the seaside when there is danger; you see the way to heaven strewn with these wrecks like Judas and Simon Magus and Ahithophel. David said, "We took sweet counsel together." It can only have been sweet to David; it could not have been to Ahithophel. He was a deceiver, a hypocrite, an apostate. So these solemn thoughts about Ahithophel who was left to perish in his sin despite his greatness and glory and profession of the truth.

"One told David, saying, Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom." Now it was a very deep sorrow to David. I think perhaps some of you here have known what it is to be let down by a friend, or perhaps you have had a very special friend, perhaps some of you younger ones, some of you children, and you have lost that friend. Perhaps that friend has treated you very unkindly, or perhaps that friend has turned against you, or perhaps that friend does not want to be friends any longer. Or it may have been that that friend has now become your enemy and has turned against you. That is a very bitter experience. David really felt the bitterness of it in his soul. There was one after another leaving him, but whoever else, he had this beloved friend, Ahithophel. He leaned on him,

depended on him. Whatever else, whoever else, there is always Ahithophel. “And one told David, saying, Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.” That prostrated David. Now some of you, perhaps you younger ones, or perhaps you older ones, have known something of that experience of losing a special friend, or perhaps being treated badly by a special friend, or perhaps even a special friend turning right against you. Well David felt it. He said, “For it was not an enemy that reproached me; then I could have borne it: ... but it was *thou*” – *thou*, Ahithophel, *thou*, mine own familiar friend, *thou*, Ahithophel. “We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company.”

Well, I am not going to ask you to turn to it this morning, but perhaps you would like to do so when you go home. For if the third Psalm was written concerning Absalom, the fifty-fifth Psalm was written concerning Ahithophel. You know the well-known, beautiful word that comes in the fifty-fifth Psalm: “Cast thy burden on the Lord.” That was David’s conclusion. He is pouring out his heart in Psalm 55 about his own beloved, special friend who has turned against him. He says, “Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest.” Perhaps some of you feel like that sometimes. If only you could fly away from your trouble. “Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest.” Beloved friends, the Lord will never give you the wings of a dove to fly away from your troubles. He will give you the wings of an eagle to bear you up above them. David said, “Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away,” get away from it all, be finished with it all.

But the beautiful verse the Lord taught him and he came to in that Psalm was this (it has been made a blessing to thousands): “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.” When that word was first spoken, what was David’s burden? Well, he had a broken heart through Absalom, and now it was as though this was going to finish him completely, Ahithophel. That was his burden, and it was a heavy one, and it was a weighty one, and he could not bear it. Then the Lord said, “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.” And David proved it, and how many of the Lord’s people down the ages have felt the power of that gracious word when the burden has been so heavy that they must well-nigh sink under it! Cast it on the Lord, whether it is your sins, your soul, eternity, your family, your business, the day of your death, your

health, the church of God, whatever it is. “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.”

“‘Cast,’ He said, ‘on Me thy care;
'Tis enough that I am nigh;
I will all thy burdens bear;
I will all thy needs supply.’”

“And one told David, saying, Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom. And David said, O Lord, I pray Thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness.” It was a short, simple, heartfelt prayer, and it turned the whole course of the battle. It turned the whole course of the war. It was graciously answered, it was soon answered, and it brought victory to David, it brought deliverance to David. Perhaps the point which has rested with me more than anything on this interesting, remarkable subject: the power of just a little prayer. You would almost call it an ejaculatory prayer. He had no time to go away in secret. He had no bedroom to go to. There was nowhere he could go and kneel down. Just faith’s response, faith’s cry, “O Lord, I pray Thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness.” But though he was under the chastening hand of God and he brought this trouble upon himself, the Lord answered that prayer. But this point, these little, short prayers, the wonders they can do. There used to be a saying years ago, *prayer changes things*. Well it does, and it did here. It changed everything. From this verse onward there is hope; there is deliverance; there is victory. O but the power of a short prayer!

Now I am sure you can think of a lot of these short prayers in Scripture. Quite a few came to the Lord Jesus with such a short prayer, but O the blessing they received! You think of godly Nehemiah before the king, just that upward glancing of an eye. “So I prayed to the God of heaven.” You think of Jehoshaphat on the battlefield when he was surrounded and death seemed certain, but he cried to the Lord and the Lord delivered him. These short prayers, these sudden prayers, O the wonders they can perform, the blessings so often in them! It is not the length of a prayer. It is not the eloquence of a prayer. “The feeblest prayer, if faith be there, exceeds all empty notion.” “The *shortest* prayer, if faith be there, exceeds all empty notion.”

But perhaps one prayer which has done more wonders than any other, three words: “Lord, help me.” Some of you know that prayer.

Some of you have to pray it often. O but the wonders that little prayer has performed! If only there could be a book written of those down the ages who in their extremity have felt they could say nothing more than, “Lord, help me,” and the Lord has most graciously appeared for them and helped them and delivered them. Of course, there was the famous case of William Gadsby which was printed as a pamphlet. Thousands upon thousands of copies were sold. To be very brief, on one occasion he received a summons that on the following Monday he had to pay £20, which I think in today’s values would be about £1,000. He did not have it, and could not see how he could get it. He went to various people who owed him money, but they said they could not pay. He went to all his friends and not one of them said they could help him. All the week there was nothing but this £20 staring him in the face. He felt the worst thing would be he would dishonour his Lord and Master. He did not get any comfort from his wife. All she could say was, “You are always preaching about faith. You will have to exercise a bit now.” Neither had he got a text. All that week he prayed, “Lord, help me.” He could not think of anything else.

When the Lord’s day morning came, the only thing he could tell the people was, “Lord, help me,” which he did. There was an afternoon service and he thought, “I will have to tell the people about, ‘Lord, help me,’ again,” and he did. There was an evening service and he thought, “It will have to be ‘Lord, help me,’ again.” He came to the end. He was disconsolate. He went into the vestry and there was a knock at the door. A man came in and said, “Mr. Gadsby, some time ago my mother died and left you £20 in her will, but dishonestly I thought you would never know, and I kept it for myself. But through your preaching today I have to give it to you,” and he gave him twenty golden sovereigns. William Gadsby said, “What have those three words down the ages meant to the church of God in all their troubles: ‘Lord, help me’?”

“And David said, O Lord, I pray Thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness.” Well, that is just what the Lord did, and it altered the whole of the scene. Ahithophel gave wonderful counsel to Absalom. If he acted in such a way, if he did certain things, then victory was sure. Well, the Lord turned the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness. There was someone there who said, I do not think Ahithophel’s counsel is good, and someone else took it up and said, Neither do I. Then Absalom said, I do not think Ahithophel is right. I think he has made a mistake. If they had followed what Ahithophel said,

David would have been a dead man that night and Absalom would have had the victory. Yet someone else came with some foolish counsel and said they must not do anything, but wait a few days. Ahithophel's counsel was turned to foolishness and Absalom followed the foolish counsel of another. You read in the next chapter: Absalom slain, and Ahithophel peeved because his counsel has not been followed, hanging himself; complete victory, God still merciful to David, David restored to his royal rights as king in Jerusalem.

What can a little prayer do? What can the simplest prayer do? It is that same point, the hearts of all men are in the Lord's hand – Ahithophel, Absalom – and what about your burdens, and your concerns, your prayers? You are thinking about all these people you have to do with. Do not forget their hearts are in the Lord's hand to turn them whithersoever He will. But do not forget the power of prayer, especially in gospel days when prayed by faith in Jesus' name, the all-prevailing plea, through His precious blood. See what your poor little prayers can do. You say, I cannot pray. See what those short prayers can do. See what those stumbling prayers can do. David had no time to pray a good prayer here. He had no time to think about his words. Well, he just said it suddenly, but this was the point, the resting place: "*O Lord, I pray Thee.*" And praying breath is never spent in vain.

"And David said, O Lord, I pray Thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness."