

Homiletics Analysis: 2 Samuel 17

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Second Samuel 17 narrates the collision of two counsel-strategies inside Absalom's rebel court and the providence of God working through ordinary human means to preserve David's life. Ahithophel, David's former counselor and one of the most respected strategic minds in Israel, urges Absalom to pursue David immediately — that very night — with a targeted force of twelve thousand men before David can regroup, demoralize his followers, and escape. His counsel is precise, swift, lethal, and humanly excellent. Hushai, David's plant inside Absalom's court, counters with a rival plan: do not pursue yet; gather all Israel first; come in overwhelming, inescapable force; pursue David personally with Absalom at the front. Hushai's advice is slower, grander, more flattering to Absalom's ego — and strategically inferior. The narrator then delivers the theological verdict: "For the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring disaster on Absalom." Ahithophel, recognizing immediately that his counsel has been rejected and that this rejection seals Absalom's fate, goes home, sets his affairs in order, and hangs himself — the first suicide in Israel's royal narrative. Meanwhile, information is smuggled out through a network of couriers — Jonathan and Ahimaaz hiding in a well, a woman covering them with grain — and David crosses the Jordan to safety at Mahanaim. The chapter ends with David's supporters gathering resources for his army, and with Ahithophel in his grave.

This Text — Intent:

God is using this chapter to demonstrate that His sovereign purposes cannot be overthrown by human strategy, however brilliant, and that He governs history through the most ordinary channels — a rejected piece of advice, a flattering speech, a woman with a bag of grain, a well, a river crossing — to accomplish exactly what He has decreed. The intent is to produce in the reader a settled confidence that God's covenant purposes and His anointed king cannot be finally defeated, even when appearances (David in flight, Absalom enthroned, the best strategist in the room working against David) suggest otherwise. The passage does not call the reader to do anything — it calls the reader to see something: that beneath the surface of human counsel and counter-counsel, God's decree is already doing its work.

Subject Sentence: God overrules brilliant human strategy to preserve His anointed king and accomplish His decreed purposes.

Primary Claim: The LORD’s sovereign governance of events — working through rejected counsel, ego, and ordinary people — demonstrates that no human wisdom, however excellent, can overturn what God has ordained; His anointed cannot be defeated by strategy alone.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in verses 14 and 23: The central theological statement of the chapter is verse 14b: “For the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring disaster on Absalom.” This verse creates genuine interpretive tension between traditions on how divine sovereignty and human agency relate.

Arminian and Wesleyan readers tend to read verse 14 as God’s foreknowledge of what humans would freely choose — God “ordained” in the sense of fore-appointed based on His anticipation of Hushai’s persuasiveness and Absalom’s vanity. On this reading, the verse is a narrative comment explaining the outcome retrospectively rather than asserting a prior divine decree shaping the deliberation itself. This reading is possible grammatically but strains the Hebrew verb (*tsivvah*, ordered/commanded/appointed) — the word implies purposive divine action, not mere foreknowledge or permission.

The Reformed reading treats verse 14 as doing exactly what it appears to do: asserting that God actively worked through Absalom’s preference for Hushai’s counsel to accomplish a specific decreed outcome. This does not mean God coerced Absalom’s will mechanically — Absalom was genuinely persuaded, genuinely chose, and is genuinely responsible for his rebellion. But the narrator insists that the sovereign hand of God was operating *through* that genuine human choosing to defeat Ahithophel’s counsel. The Westminster Confession’s language of God “ordaining whatsoever comes to pass” without being “the author of sin” or doing “violence to the will of the creature” captures the distinction precisely. The text supports this reading both by the verb choice and by the narrative structure: the narrator does not say God *permitted* Absalom to reject Ahithophel — he says God *ordained* the defeat of that counsel. The Reformed reading is preferred as the one that most naturally accounts for the text’s own claim.

Ahithophel’s suicide (verse 23): Some traditions (particularly those with strong pastoral concern around suicide) are reluctant to treat Ahithophel’s death as calmly as the narrator does — the text neither condemns nor mourns it. The narrative presents it as the act of a man who understood the strategic situation clearly and chose to die rather than face the consequences of backing the losing side. Roman Catholic tradition has historically treated suicide as mortally sinful; some evangelical preachers overread the text to find either moral condemnation or desperate tragedy that the narrator simply does not supply. The Reformed reading is to follow the narrator’s restraint: this is a moment of dark dignity —

Ahithophel is a man of such clarity that he perceives Absalom's doom from the moment his counsel is rejected, sets his house in order with characteristic precision, and exits the story. The narrator's silence on moral evaluation should be respected rather than supplemented from elsewhere. The text's emphasis is on the *result* of Ahithophel's rejection (he dies; his counsel, though excellent, comes to nothing) rather than a theological verdict on his death.

Hushai as deceiver: Some readers are troubled by the hero of this chapter being a deliberate deceiver — Hushai is David's agent, intentionally feeding Absalom false counsel, and praised for it. Dispensational and some Baptist readers sometimes flag this as a moral problem the text ought to address. The Reformed reading draws on the broader category of covenant loyalty under conditions of rebel usurpation: Hushai's loyalty to David's legitimate throne, operating under David's explicit commission (2 Samuel 15:34), places his deception in the category of loyal resistance to an illegitimate seizure of power, not simple lying. The Bible's own narrative commends Hushai's role without moral qualification; the New Testament does not revisit it. Preachers need not manufacture a moral problem the text does not present.

Key Canonical Support

- **Proverbs 19:21** — *“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.”* — The thematic principle of 2 Samuel 17 stated as wisdom; Ahithophel's excellent plan is precisely the kind of human planning that the LORD overrules.
- **Proverbs 21:30** — *“No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.”* — Direct canonical corroboration: Ahithophel's counsel, however good, cannot stand against what God has ordained.
- **Isaiah 46:9–11** — God declares the end from the beginning and accomplishes His purpose through whom He will — the same claim operating at the macro level that 2 Samuel 17 demonstrates at the micro level of a single night's deliberation.
- **Acts 2:23** — The most developed canonical parallel: Jesus delivered “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” through the hands of lawless men — God working through human agency, including hostile and sinful human agency, to accomplish His sovereign and saving purpose. The pattern is the same; the stakes are infinitely higher.
- **Romans 8:28** — *“All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.”* — The experiential application of the pattern 2 Samuel 17 narrates: God's governance through all circumstances — including David's flight, Hushai's deception, Ahithophel's suicide — is purposive and ultimately good for His people.

Aim: To show that God’s sovereign governance of ordinary events — persuasive speeches, vanity, a grain-covered well, a river crossing — is not the background noise of history but its governing principle, so that readers learn to look beneath the surface of their own circumstances for the hand of the LORD already at work.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–4	Ahithophel presents his plan to Absalom: strike David tonight with 12,000 men; kill the king alone; bring all Israel back to Absalom peacefully.	“The plan seemed right in the eyes of Absalom and all the elders of Israel.” First evaluation — humanly, it is excellent.
5–6	Absalom calls for Hushai and asks him to evaluate Ahithophel’s counsel.	The opening Hushai needs. He has been planted for exactly this moment (2 Sam 15:34).
7–13	Hushai refutes Ahithophel’s counsel and proposes his own: David is a mighty warrior, his men are fierce, a small strike force risks catastrophe; gather all Israel, come in overwhelming numbers, Absalom at the front, and destroy David utterly.	Hushai knows how to appeal to Absalom’s ego (“you yourself going to battle”), his fear of failure, and his desire for glory. The counsel is militarily inferior but rhetorically superior.
14	Absalom and all Israel prefer Hushai’s counsel over Ahithophel’s. Theological verdict: “For the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring disaster on Absalom.”	The pivot verse of the chapter — and one of the clearest statements of providential governance in the Historical Books.
15–16	Hushai immediately informs Zadok and Abiathar; sends word to David: do not spend the night at the fords of the	The information pipeline David established (2 Sam 15:35–36) now activates at the critical moment.

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	wilderness; cross the Jordan immediately.	
17–20	Jonathan and Ahimaaz are hiding at En-rogel; a servant girl relays Hushai's message; a lad sees them and reports to Absalom; they hide in a well at Bahurim; a woman covers the well with grain and misdirects Absalom's servants.	Remarkable narrative texture: sovereign providence working through a serving girl, a lad, a woman with ground grain, a dry well. No miracles — all ordinary.
21–22	The couriers emerge, reach David, deliver the message; David and all his people cross the Jordan before morning.	David survives. The plan has worked.
23	Ahithophel sees that his counsel has been rejected, goes home to his city, sets his house in order, and hangs himself. He is buried in his father's tomb.	The narrator's spare account — no moral commentary, no lamentation. Ahithophel understands what David's survival means.
24–26	David arrives at Mahanaim; Absalom crosses the Jordan with all Israel; Amasa (David's nephew, Joab's cousin) is made Absalom's army commander.	The stage set for the battle to come (chapter 18). Amasa is a significant appointment — family complications compound military ones.
27–29	Shobi, Machir, and Barzillai bring provisions to David at Mahanaim: beds, basins, earthen vessels, wheat, barley, flour, parched grain, beans, lentils, honey, curds, sheep, and cheese.	God's provision through loyal friends. David, the fugitive king, is sustained by ordinary generosity. The list's specificity is notable — the narrator sees God in the details.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
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Division	Verses	Label
1	1–4	The Counsel That Should Have Won
2	5–13	The Counter-Counsel That Did Win
3	14	The LORD’s Verdict on the Deliberation
4	15–22	The Providence Working Through Ordinary Channels
5	23	The End of the Counselor
6	24–29	The Fugitive King Sustained

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God overrules brilliant human strategy to preserve His anointed king and accomplish His decreed purposes.

Primary Claim: The LORD’s sovereign governance of events — working through rejected counsel, ego, and ordinary people — demonstrates that no human wisdom, however excellent, can overturn what God has ordained; His anointed cannot be defeated by strategy alone.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize that God governs through the texture of ordinary events, not only through the dramatic ones. The means of David’s survival in this chapter are strikingly mundane: a speech that flattered a vain man’s ego, a serving girl who passed a message, a woman who poured grain over a well. There is no pillar of fire, no angel, no miracle. God’s sovereignty in this passage is his governance *through* the ordinary — and this is the rule, not the exception. Readers who are waiting for spectacular divine intervention before they see God at work have missed the lesson of this chapter entirely. Learn to read your circumstances the way this narrator reads his: looking for what God is accomplishing through the unremarkable sequence of events you are already living.

2. Let the theological verdict of verse 14 reframe how you interpret apparent defeats. When David’s cause looked most lost — his best counselor working for the enemy, his own son enthroned in Jerusalem, the most strategically excellent plan being laid against him — that is precisely when the narrator inserts the statement that God had *already* ordained the defeat of that plan. The reader is invited to carry this interpretive lens into their own life: the moment that looks most like strategic defeat may be the moment when God’s ordination is most decisively at work. Do not read circumstances as God’s final word — the narrator gives you God’s verdict before the story plays out, and it is not the same verdict the circumstances would suggest.

3. Examine what your preferences and vanities are being used to accomplish that you cannot see. Absalom chose Hushai's counsel because it was more flattering to his ego, more grandiose in its vision of him at the front of all Israel's armies, more satisfying to his self-image as a conquering king. He thought he was making a strategic decision; he was, the narrator tells us, being governed by a divine decree working through his own pride. This is a sobering diagnostic: our preferences, our vanities, our susceptibility to flattery are not outside God's governance — they are often precisely the mechanism through which He accomplishes purposes we cannot see. Ask what your own preferences and ego-investments may be serving that you have not yet reckoned with.

4. Honor the faithful, unremarkable people who serve God's purposes without recognition. The woman at Bahurim who covered the well with grain and sent Absalom's servants in the wrong direction receives no name, no commendation, no further mention in Scripture. Jonathan and Ahimaaz, the couriers who hid in the well, get two verses. Barzillai and his companions who brought food to David's army are remembered briefly and then largely pass out of the narrative. The chapter is populated with people who served at great personal risk in ways that would never be remembered as heroic or strategic. Their faithfulness was the ordinary means through which God preserved his anointed. The kingdom of God is sustained by people like this — unnamed, unremarkable, faithful in the moment that counts. Be one of them.

5. Feel the weight of what it means to work against what God has ordained. Ahithophel is one of the most sobering figures in the Old Testament. He was right. His counsel was better. He saw more clearly than Absalom, more clearly perhaps than anyone else in the room — and his clarity destroyed him, because what he clearly saw was that his brilliant, correct strategy had been overruled and that the man he had betrayed would survive and return. The text does not gloat over his suicide; it reports it with spare dignity. But it is a devastating portrait of what it looks like to invest one's life and counsel and legacy in opposing what God has decreed. The appropriate response is not smugness but trembling: am I investing my life in what God is doing, or in what I have determined to accomplish?

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: This chapter is one of the Old Testament's clearest narrative demonstrations of compatibilist divine providence — the doctrine that God's sovereign ordination of events operates through, not around or against, genuine human deliberation, choice, and agency. God did not prevent Ahithophel's counsel from being spoken or prevent Absalom from hearing it. He governed the outcome of the deliberation through Absalom's own free preference, Hushai's God-given rhetorical skill, and the vanity that had already been growing in Absalom for years. The chapter also demonstrates that God's providential care for His anointed is specific, active, and particular — not a general benevolence toward good people, but a purposive governance aimed at the preservation of the covenant king from whom the promised Messiah would come. Verse 14 stands as a

theological stake in the ground: the narrator refuses to let the chapter be read as merely a story about human political intrigue. It is a story about what God was doing *through* the political intrigue.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Second Samuel 17 is a foundational text for the Reformed doctrine of providence as expressed in the Westminster Confession (Chapter V): God, “the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence.” The chapter also corroborates the Confession’s insistence that God’s ordaining of events does not “violence to the will of the creature, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.” Absalom genuinely deliberated; Hushai genuinely persuaded; Ahithophel genuinely counseled — and through all of it, God accomplished precisely what He had ordained. The chapter also carries redemptive-historical weight: David is the covenant king, the ancestor of the Son of David, and the preservation of David’s line in this chapter is ultimately the preservation of the line through which God would redeem the world. When Absalom’s coup fails, it is not merely David’s personal survival that is secured — it is the unbroken chain of covenant promise running from 2 Samuel 7 to Bethlehem. The Reformed reader sees in David’s survival a foreshadowing of the indestructibility of the messianic line itself.

Main Takeaway

God had already decided what was going to happen before Absalom asked his second counselor a single question. The most brilliant strategic mind in the room was working against David — and it made no difference, because no wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD. Stop computing your odds based on who has the better strategy. Look for what God has already ordained, and take your position there.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the chapter to a political thriller and missing verse 14.** The narrative texture of 2 Samuel 17 is genuinely gripping — rival counselors, spies, a well, a woman, a river crossing at dawn. It is easy to preach the chapter as a tense survival story and arrive at applications like “God uses ordinary people” or “stay alert in dangerous times” without ever landing on the chapter’s own theological verdict. Verse 14 is not a footnote — it is the interpretive key the narrator inserts to tell the reader what the entire chapter is *about*. Any exposition that does not anchor to verse 14 has missed the passage’s own governing claim.

- **Moralistic use of Hushai: “Be a loyal friend” or “Be wise in your words.”** Hushai is a fascinating figure, and it is tempting to use him as a model of loyalty, rhetorical skill, or strategic thinking. These observations are not wrong, but they are secondary. The chapter does not commend Hushai’s wisdom as an example to emulate — it uses Hushai’s wisdom as one of the ordinary instruments through which God defeated Ahithophel’s counsel. The application is not “be like Hushai” but “see what God was doing *through* Hushai.” Hushai-centered preaching is a form of the moralizing the Clowney anti-moralism principle directly guards against.
- **Domesticating Ahithophel’s suicide with imported moral commentary.** The narrator reports Ahithophel’s death with remarkable restraint — no condemnation, no lament, no theological verdict. Preachers sometimes feel compelled to supplement the narrative with either a condemnation of suicide (importing New Testament or broader biblical ethics into a moment of narrative silence) or an extended pastoral digression on despair and mental health. Both moves, however pastorally well-intentioned, displace the narrator’s own emphasis. The point of Ahithophel’s death in the narrative is that even the most clear-sighted human counselor cannot survive the defeat of his strategy by the LORD. Follow the narrator’s restraint.
- **Treating providence as a reason for passivity.** The chapter’s emphasis on God’s sovereign governance of events can be misread as an argument for fatalism: “Since God is in control, there is nothing I need to do.” But the chapter shows precisely the opposite: David establishes the intelligence network, Hushai performs his commission faithfully, Jonathan and Ahimaaz run at personal risk, the woman at Bahurim thinks and acts quickly. God’s providence operates *through* human action and faithfulness, not in its absence. Preaching that uses divine sovereignty to excuse passivity or discourage human responsibility has not read this chapter carefully.
- **Failing to connect David’s preservation to the covenant promise of 2 Samuel 7.** The stakes of this chapter are not merely biographical — David’s life — but covenantal. The seed of David must survive because the Son of David must come. A sermon on 2 Samuel 17 that does not at least gesture toward this redemptive-historical dimension has told the story without saying what the story is ultimately about. David’s survival is not just good news for David; it is good news for everyone who would ever need a Savior from his line.
- **Sentimentalizing Barzillai’s provisions without seeing Providence in them.** The closing verses listing the specific food items brought to David’s army (beds, basins, wheat, barley, parched grain, honey, curds, cheese) can be treated as a warm human-interest conclusion — loyal friends rallying to the exiled king. This is not wrong, but the narrative is doing something more: it is showing that God sustained David through the specific and ordinary generosity of specific and ordinary people. The detail of the provision list is the narrator’s way of saying: look at how precisely

God cared for His servant. The application is not merely “have loyal friends” but “see the LORD’s hand even in the grain and curds.”