

“The Ittai Choice”

2 Samuel 15:1-23

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Introduction:

»PPT» This morning I would invite you to turn with me to the Old Testament book of **2 Samuel—2 Samuel 15**—in our pew Bibles, the Scripture is found starting on **page 516**—and in our passage for this morning, we come to one of the darkest days in the period of the kings, and we come to a profound lesson from a rather obscure character in the history of God’s people. The man’s name was Ittai, and for reasons that will become rather obvious as we read the passage, I have titled this morning’s lesson, ***“The Ittai Choice.”*** The account takes place during the reign of King David, as King David continues to suffer the consequences of his adulterous affair with Bathsheba. David at this point has a number of children by several different women, and these adult children are not getting along (to say the least). One son, a man by the name of Absalom, comes back from several years in exile after having murdered his own step-brother (another story right there). But when he returns, he sees that his younger half-brother Solomon will most likely inherit the throne, and so he sets out to undermine the reign of his father. We will see the plan unfold in the opening verses of **2 Samuel 15**, and by the time the chapter is over, King David is fleeing from the city. If you will, then, please look with me at what happens as Absalom starts to rally support and as a man by the name of Ittai faces a very important decision—**2 Samuel 15:1-23...**

¹ Now it came about after this that Absalom provided for himself a chariot and horses and fifty men as runners before him. ² Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way to the gate; and when any man had a suit to come to the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, “From what city are you?” And he would say, “Your servant is from one of the tribes of Israel.” ³ Then Absalom would say to him, “See, your claims are good and right, but no man listens to you on the part of the king.” ⁴ Moreover, Absalom would say, “Oh that one would appoint me judge in the land, then every man who has any suit or cause could come to me and I would give him justice.” ⁵ And when a man came near to prostrate himself before him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him. ⁶ In this manner Absalom dealt with all Israel who came to the king for judgment; so Absalom stole away the hearts of the men of Israel.

⁷ Now it came about at the end of forty years that Absalom said to the king, "Please let me go and pay my vow which I have vowed to the LORD, in Hebron." ⁸ "For your servant vowed a vow while I was living at Geshur in Aram, saying, 'If the LORD shall indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will serve the LORD.'" ⁹ The king said to him, "Go in peace." So he arose and went to Hebron. ¹⁰ But Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, "As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then you shall say, 'Absalom is king in Hebron.'" ¹¹ Then two hundred men went with Absalom from Jerusalem, who were invited and went innocently, and they did not know anything. ¹² And Absalom sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counselor, from his city Giloh, while he was offering the sacrifices. And the conspiracy was strong, for the people increased continually with Absalom.

¹³ Then a messenger came to David, saying, "The hearts of the men of Israel are with Absalom." ¹⁴ David said to all his servants who were with him at Jerusalem, "Arise and let us flee, for otherwise none of us will escape from Absalom. Go in haste, or he will overtake us quickly and bring down calamity on us and strike the city with the edge of the sword." ¹⁵ Then the king's servants said to the king, "Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever my lord the king chooses." ¹⁶ So the king went out and all his household with him. But the king left ten concubines to keep the house. ¹⁷ The king went out and all the people with him, and they stopped at the last house. ¹⁸ Now all his servants passed on beside him, all the Cherethites, all the Pelethites and all the Gittites, six hundred men who had come with him from Gath, passed on before the king.

¹⁹ Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, "Why will you also go with us? Return and remain with the king, for you are a foreigner and also an exile; return to your own place." ²⁰ "You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander with us, while I go where I will? Return and take back your brothers; mercy and truth be with you." ²¹ But Ittai answered the king and said, "As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be." ²² Therefore David said to Ittai, "Go and pass over." So Ittai the Gittite passed over with all his men and all the little ones who were with him. ²³ While all the country was weeping with a loud voice, all the people passed over. The king also passed over the brook Kidron, and all the people passed over toward the way of the wilderness.

This morning, I would like for us to consider the choice that Ittai was facing, I would like for us to apply it to our situation today, and then finally, I would like for us to consider the actual decision that was made.

I. **But first of all, please think with me about THE CHOICE THAT ITTAI WAS FACING. »PPT»**

And here at the beginning, we can understand Ittai's dilemma. He had apparently joined up with King David as an outsider. We know that Ittai was a Philistine. The Philistines had been enemies of God's people for many years, going all the way back to the Exodus from Egypt. But not only was Ittai a Philistine, he was also from the city of Gath. Is this sounding a little familiar—a Philistine from Gath? You may remember that many years earlier, as a teenager, David (the runt of the litter, the little kid in the family) was tending his father's sheep and was sent on a little mission to bring his brothers some food on the battlefield, and when he got there, David saw a giant Philistine from Gath taunting God's people. David couldn't believe no one was doing anything about it, and so he took those five smooth stones from the creek and used his slingshot to lodge one of those stones in the giant's forehead. David then walked over to the body, took Goliath's own sword, and used that sword to cut Goliath's head off. David, therefore, had a rather interesting relationship with the Philistines from Gath! But for some reason, Ittai, also a Philistine from Gath, had just recently joined up with King David, and so he is now in a very precarious situation. He can't really go back to Gath—those people hated King David like we can hardly even imagine—David had humiliated their nation and their little village in particular, and so Ittai is now in the position of either running with a rejected king who is on his way out to the wilderness or he can join up with Absalom, a quick-talking politician.

Let us first consider King David. Unlike modern politics here in the U.S., we normally don't kill the outgoing king. But in the ancient world, David knew that this was a distinct possibility—he basically says as much in **verse 14**—he knew that Absalom would bring them down with the edge of the sword. David could see that the tide had turned, and so instead of staying to fight, instead of harming so many innocent people, King David decided to leave Jerusalem. As a shepherd, even as the legitimate king, David wanted what was best for the people, and so he fled from the capital city in disgrace.

On the other side, then, is Absalom. Look back and notice with me, please, **2 Samuel 14:25**. The Bible says, ***“Now in all Israel was no one as handsome as Absalom, so highly praised; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no defect in him.”*** This was a man with **“John Edwards hair.”** He was known for his beautiful hair. You know, I get my hair cut, and it falls down on that little cape they put around my neck, they shake it out on the floor, they then sweep it up and throw it away. But not Absalom! Back in the previous chapter again, the Bible says in **verse 26**, ***“When he cut the hair of his head (and it was at the end of every year that he cut it, for it was heavy on him so he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head at 200 shekels by the king's weight.”*** Can you imagine weighing your hair after your yearly haircut? This man was vain! It was a huge deal, and the hair from his yearly haircut weighed in at about 5 pounds. That's a lot of hair, and he was so proud of his hair—he used it to gain popularity. And in our passage for this morning, he played on that popularity. The Bible explains that Absalom hired 50 men as bodyguards, and these men would run around with him, making him look important. On **Law & Order** this week, I learned that you can

hire paparazzi to make yourself look important, to make yourself look special. Absalom definitely would have done this!

In our reading for this morning, we find that Absalom would have made an awesome politician. He did not say, **“Hey, I’m getting ready to overthrow my father as king, so I need you to come join my side.”** No, he didn’t say that—people would have never signed on for something like that. But he put himself in just the right spot at just the right time of day just as men were coming to the king to settle their disputes. He would meet the men of Israel on the road and would pretend to be interested in their cases, **“Oh, I wish I could be judge! I know what I would decide in your case!”** He put himself out there—he was a schmoozer, making all kinds of promises, **“If I were in charge, we would solve all these problems! If only, if only, if only....”** Absalom would then end each meeting with a kiss. We talk about politicians kissing babies. Absalom would have loved that! And so the Bible says in verse 6, ***“In this manner Absalom dealt with all Israel who came to the king for judgment; so Absalom stole away the hearts of the men of Israel.”***

Ittai, therefore, faced a choice—on one hand, Absalom, the slick, long-haired, promise-making, baby-kissing politician, and on the other hand, King David—a father running from his own son, an Israelite fleeing from his own people, a king rejected by the nation, a loser on his way out. And yet even to David, the choice is obvious. On his way out of Jerusalem in disgrace, King David stops at the last house (at the end of verse 17), he stops at the last house on the edge of town, and as he looks over those who are leaving with him, he notices Ittai the Gittite, and King David almost seems surprised. He is shocked that such a new convert would want to follow him out into the wilderness in exile. And so the king gives Ittai an out, he gives him permission to stay, to become a follower of Absalom, to stay with the new king, to switch sides while there is still time. No hard feelings. No one would blame Ittai for going back. After all, Ittai has a family. In the eyes of most people, Ittai was still registered as an Independent (as we might say today). Ittai could have gone either way. Ittai, therefore, is faced with a choice—the Ittai choice.

II. As we think about Ittai’s choice—a choice between two ways of life, a choice between two ways to serve, a choice between two rulers, a choice between two masters—we suddenly realize that THIS IS A CHOICE WE MAKE every time we get up in the morning, every time we go to work, every time we go to school. TODAY, LIKE ITTAI, WE CHOOSE WHOM WE WILL SERVE. ▶PPT▶

It’s a choice we make all the time. On one hand, we have the Absalom factor. On one side we have popularity, and success, and pleasure, and glamour, and attraction—we feel the pull of those who appear to be on their way up to the top. Adults and teenagers all want to be on the inside, we want to be included, not excluded. That pull is represented by Absalom.

But then on the other hand we have David—the rejected king, a small group of losers headed for the wilderness. And sure, David was the king of Israel, a man after God’s own heart, chosen by God and all that. But David is on the run. No one is eager to jump on board with a king like David at this point in his life. No one looks forward to this. No one wants rejection—not on the playground, not in middle school, not in high school, not in college, not in the workplace, not in our neighborhoods. No one wants to follow someone who is on the way out. No one wants to bet it all on a loser.

So often, God’s plan and God’s kingdom look so small and weak—especially when compared to everything else that is going on in the world out there. You may remember that John the Baptist had this problem with Jesus. John’s mission was to prepare the way for the Messiah, and yet after some time, John started to wonder if Jesus was really the one, if perhaps John had picked the wrong side. It wasn’t looking good, and so the Bible says (in **Matthew 11**), ***“Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, ‘Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?’”*** You see, John was worried. It didn’t look good, and so he started to question his decision. You may remember how the disciples were facing a similar challenge at the crucifixion. In **Matthew 26:56**, the Bible says that when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the garden, that ***“...all the disciples left Him and fled.”*** They all ran away. Perhaps they wondered whether they had come down on the wrong side, and so they turned and ran away.

And here we are today—we look around at the seeming weakness of God’s kingdom, and like Ittai, and John the Baptist, and the disciples, our faith is also being tested. Perhaps sometimes we wish that God would seem a little stronger in this world so that we could be on the ***“inside,”*** and yet we realize this morning that this is part of it. Jesus Christ, the Almighty King, warned us in advance that, ***“...the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it”*** (**Matthew 7:14**). Even those in the religious world are headed in one direction, but Jesus is headed in another, and it is not a popular or easy decision to make. The King has promised (in **Matthew 5:11**) that if we choose to follow Him, we will be insulted, and persecuted, we will be slandered; in short, as Jesus said in **John 17:14**, if we make the Ittai choice, we will be ***“hated”*** by the world.

III. But before we close this morning, let us please go back and notice THE DECISION ITTAI ACTUALLY MADE. »PPT»

The dilemma is this: To either stick with a cause or a person who has been rejected by the world or to join the successful and sophisticated majority. In other words: To either stick with the Lord or to give up following Jesus so that we can start following the world. The Ittai Choice: A choice between life and death. But we thank and praise God that Ittai was not deceived by Absalom’s smooth speech, and so he replied to the king in **verse 21**, ***“As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be.”*** In this dark chapter, what a refreshing statement! Our minds go back to a similar statement made under similar

circumstances, we think of a statement that was made by King David's own great-grandmother—a statement made by Ruth to Naomi, ***“Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me”*** (**Ruth 1:16-17**). I cannot help but think that Ittai's statement made King David think back to his own great-grandmother who pledged her loyalty (even as a foreigner) to a child of God.

King David accepted Ittai's loyalty (in **verse 22**), ***“Therefore David said to Ittai, ‘Go and pass over.’ So Ittai the Gittite passed over with all his men and all the little ones who were with him.”*** Ittai, therefore, fell in line with the exiles who were fleeing from Jerusalem, he went on to become one of David's most trusted generals, and several chapters later when David returns in victory, Ittai is still there and is commanding 1/3 of David's army. **I would suggest this morning that there is a giant bigger than Goliath from Gath!** Ittai was a man of amazing spiritual strength. David was in no position to promise any kind of reward, no salary, no prize, no security for his family. And yet Ittai could say to King David that whether in life or in death, ***“I am sticking with you!”*** He saw the choice between Absalom and David and what each stood for. He knew that if Absalom won, nothing decent, nothing true, nothing honest, nothing upright would ever be safe in Israel again.

And so when everyone turned against God's anointed king, Ittai did the unpopular thing—the thing that everyone else ridiculed—he stayed with God's choice! He stayed with God's king, and he served for many years. Whether it was in the capital city or in the wilderness, Ittai made his choice. At the time, all he could see was the wilderness. It looked bad. And so the Ittai choice took some amazing courage. He chose honor over success, truth over pleasure, integrity over wealth, self respect over popularity. These are all choices that we are asked to make today. Ittai understood that the ways of God are more important than the ways of the world and nothing in this world is worth the loss of doing what is right. Or, as Jesus said in **Mark 8:34**, ***“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”*** The cross here symbolizes our willingness to make the Ittai choice, the choice to give up anything, even our lives, for the glory of following Jesus.

As we apply the account of Ittai the Gittite to our situation today, we realize that in a symbolic way our King has also left the city, and that we are also being called on to join Him. As the Bible says in **Hebrews 13:12-14**, ***“Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come.”*** Those with the courage of Ittai will follow the true King into the wilderness. We are committed to God's King, even when it doesn't look good—in spite of ridicule and rejection. We have been saved to serve God, and God's way can be very difficult—the road of self-denial. It takes courage to be Godly without first checking to see whether it is popular, to follow God despite the cost. The Ittai choice takes

courage, it is possible, but we do have to chose it—we can't let ourselves coast or drift. This is not a choice for wimps or whiners. But the choice is an honor and a privilege.

Conclusion:

As we close this morning's lesson, I would like to ask several of our men to start passing out some nametags to try to help us remember who we are during this week.

»PPT» We have enough for every human being in this room—no matter what your age. But our mission in this new year is to be an Ittai for Christ—to pray and to choose that we will do for God what Ittai did for King David—to stand up and do what is right, doing whatever it takes, regardless of the cost. As Paul said in **2 Corinthians 5:14-15**, ***“For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”*** Just as Ittai did for David, we do for Christ—standing up and doing whatever it takes, whatever that means for us.

Those of you who know the rest of this story know that Absalom's rebellion ultimately failed and that Absalom died a humiliating death. Remember that long, flowing hair? The Bible explains in **2 Samuel 18** that the forces of David and the forces of Absalom met in a forest for battle, and the Bible says that while Absalom was riding around on a mule, he rode under a giant oak tree, his long flowing hair got tangled in the tree, the mule kept on going, and Absalom was left hanging there in the tree! He was then killed right there in the tree! Absalom brought all kinds of trouble into God's kingdom and died in disgrace. **I hope you will join me in trying to be more like Ittai over this coming year.**

Under the New Covenant, we make this lifelong commitment by turning away from sin, by publicly confessing our belief in Jesus as God's Son, and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our past sins. At the point of baptism, our old life is buried with Christ, and we are born again into the family of God. If you are already a Christian and need the prayers of this congregation, we would invite you to write something down and bring it to the front in just a moment. But if you are ready to make a fresh start this morning, if you are ready to make the Ittai choice, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org