

2 SAMUEL 15:19-23

Ittai, a heathen, amongst
the true people of God

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1. Who was Ittai?

Ittai was an uncircumcised Philistine (1 Samuel 17:36), a military commander from Gath, who was probably in charge of the 600 Gittites who formed David's personal body-guard (2 Samuel 15:18). He later became an equal with Joab and Abishai, the most experienced generals in David's army (18:2).

David had spent some time in Gath on earlier occasions (1 Samuel 21:10-15, 27:1-7) and while being pursued by Saul had a personal army of 600 men (1 Samuel 23:13, 25:13, 30:9). It is most probable that Ittai had become attached to David on some such occasion, rather than having recently come over to his side, as it is unlikely that David would have entrusted a newly arrived foreigner over one-third of his army. **יְמֵמֶלֶךְ** does have to be literally rendered "yesterday", but can refer to the period of time before the present (Genesis 31:5, Job 8:9).

2. Ittai's attachment to God's people

The context of this incident is the usurpation of the throne by David's son, Absalom. David flees Jerusalem rather than staying to fight, for fear of excessive vengeance or treachery on the people (verse 14), and also so that he can see who his faithful followers are. David was the true anointed of the Lord, so that in strongly attaching himself to David Ittai is showing that he wants to be identified with the Lord's people. The following three points show that he is indeed to be counted as a member of the covenant people.

(a) In addressing David he swears by the covenant name of the Lord (**יהוה**). It was by this name that Moses had commanded the people to swear when they did swear (Deuteronomy 6:13, 10:20). Calvin comments on this in connection with Exodus 23:13, "... the people are commanded to swear by the name of the one God; which is equivalent to rendering to His sacred name in our outward profession of service the unmixed reverence it deserves" (page 832). By thus swearing, Ittai professes that the Lord is his God.

(b) Ittai manifests a clear desire to be with the people of God. He cannot be dissuaded from joining the fleeing army although David takes pains to point out the disadvantages (verses 19-20). Ittai is a foreigner and David's future is far from clear. Yet so strong is his attachment that it is bonded with a solemn oath. He makes the same costly decision that Ruth did (1:16-17, 2:11-12). By contrast the apostles fled when their King had been rejected (Matthew 26:56) although they had all previously firmly rejected that they could ever be unfaithful (verse 35).

(c) David asks the Lord to give Ittai His covenant blessings. **חֶסֶד** and **אֱמֻנָה** are so frequently found together that they are like Siamese twins (e.g. Exodus 34:6, 2 Samuel 2:6, Psalm 25:10, 86:15, Proverbs 3:3, 14:22). They are essential to the very character of God. **חֶסֶד**, mercy (R.S.V. has 'steadfast love') describes God in His benevolent disposition towards His people in the framework of the covenant. **אֱמֻנָה**, truth, is God's trustworthiness and faithfulness to His covenant promises. Wherever God's chariot goes the two ruts made are those of mercy and truth, not to all, but only to the covenant people (1 Kings 8:23, Micah 7:20). David appears to be acknowledging here that such marks have been made in the life of Ittai.

3. Ittai anticipates eschatological universalism

Ittai is therefore an example of one of those, who having been born outside the covenant people, is yet incorporated into the covenant. The promise that all nations would be blessed in Abraham (Genesis 12:3, etc.) was only anticipated in the Old Testament, and not really attempted until Christ commanded His disciples to go to the ends of the world with the gospel (Matthew 28:18-20). Yet God's dealings with Israel were never in isolation from the surrounding nations, for Israel was to represent God to the nations, as the priests did the people of Israel (Isaiah 2:1-4, 37:20). As the constant rebellion and hardness of heart of the covenant nation is manifested the prophets paint in brighter colours to new covenant universalism (Psalm 87, Isaiah 66:19, Amos 9:11-12, Zechariah 14:9). Ittai is in good company with the Moabitess Ruth, the Canaanite Ruth, the Syrian Namaan, and many other non-Israelites. David and the other Psalmists constantly recognize that the Lord is to be worshipped by all peoples (e.g. 66:8, 67:3).

Yet the spread of the true religion was not by outreach, but by an ingathering of the peoples to Jerusalem specifically (1 Kings 8:41-43, Isaiah 2:1-4). It was in this way that Ittai was gathered into the company of the people of God. But his inclusion intimates a time when the knowledge of God will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9); of a time when an efficacious sacrifice will be made, not just for the nation of Israel, but for all the peoples of the world (Isaiah 49:6, 1 Timothy 2:6, 1 John 2:2, Revelation 5:9, 7:9); of the universal reign of God over all flesh in the person of His Son, and not just over His people Israel (Psalm 2:8, 72:8,17).

4. Ittai a true disciple of the Lord

In Israel Ittai was a stranger (נָכְרִי, LXX ξένος) and an exile (גֵּל). Israel had a definite mission of love towards such sojourners in their midst, for they were once sojourners in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:19). But by and large, the heathen remained strangers to the covenant of grace, although in Christ they are brought near (Ephesians 2:19, ξένος).

In another sense the children of Israel themselves were strangers (Psalm 39:12, 1 Chronicles 29:15, Hebrews 11:13, cf. Genesis 23:4) and in the New Testament all believers are called strangers and pilgrims (1 Peter 2:11) as they recognize that the world is not their home for they look for a more abiding city (Hebrews 11:10,16). Keil and Delitzsch interpret לְמִקוֹם as meaning, "And thou hast still no fatherland, i.e. thou art still wandering about through the earth like an exile from his country; wherever thou findest a place, and art allowed to settle, there only canst thou dwell" (page 419). Ittai chose to wander with David, as the Israelites did in the wilderness (Numbers 32:13) and as the people of God still do (1 Corinthians 10:1-11, Hebrews 3:6-4:11). He thus relinquished the world that he might be identified with the people of God (Hebrews 11:24-25). By such denial and identification, he showed himself to be a true disciple just as Christ Himself said (Matthew 19:29, Mark 8:34-37, Luke 14:25-33),

5. Conclusion

By his act of dedication and devotion to David and to his Lord, Ittai shows both the character of a person who is truly following the Lord, and also the fact that the Lord's saving purposes are not confined to one nation but are universal.