

Sermon 35: 2 Samuel 3:6-4:12: Power struggle

OUTLINE

Abner
Joab
David

INTRODUCTION

The change of governments and especially civil war is a hard time for any government. The corruption, the ambitions of men, the manipulations, blackmail, negotiations, the deceit, the murder and all this mixed with civil war. This is what we find in our portion. Yet the will of God triumphs, the promises of God come to pass.

Why do we have the details in the 7 ½ year period before David becomes king recorded? To show that God's promises will triumph; but not without a lot of interference and trouble along the way. One commentator in surveying these chapters tells us that the section clearly teaches us three things:

'No kingdom can overcome the kingdom (Abner, Chap. 2)

No folly can thwart the kingdom (Joab, Chap. 3)

No injustice can establish the kingdom (Baanah and Rechab, Chap 4).¹

The ambition, the folly, and the injustice of man do not produce the kingdom of God, but nor can they overthrow it. These three points revolve around the three main characters we want to look at, Abner, Joab and David. The true main character in all of this though is God who brings His sovereign purposes to pass despite the sinfulness of man. Let us look at these three men as it leads to the point David will become king.

Abner

V6, 'While there was war between the house of Saul and the house of David, Abner was making himself strong in the house of Saul.' Abner was using the civil war to his advantage strengthening his own position while holding up the puppet king Ish-Bosheth. We see that in v7 he slept with one of Saul's concubines. A concubine was not simply a mistress, Saul would have been joined to her in a formal ceremony, and she would have had all the rights of a married woman. Traditionally sleeping with a conquered king's concubines was a way of claiming his throne. Ish-Bosheth understood the act and could not allow it to go unchallenged. Abner must have sensed that Ish-Bosheth was showing too much spine and would present difficulties for his political ambitions and uses religion to bolster up his pro-Abner policies, 8-10, 'Then Abner was very angry over the words of Ish-bosheth and said, "Am I a dog's head of Judah? To this day I keep showing steadfast love to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers, and to his friends, and have not given you into the hand of David. And yet you charge me today with a fault concerning a woman. 9 God do so to Abner and more also, if I do not accomplish for David what the LORD has sworn to him, 10 to transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul and set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan to Beersheba.'

Abner denies his own claims. He claims to not be working for Judah and he claims to be loyal to the house of Saul. He then goes and swears in God's name to work for Judah thereby stopping his loyalty to Saul's house. This oath like all oaths on the lips on the

¹ Davis, p49.

unsaved is a terrible thing. He calls God in to witness to him seeking his own will and not God's will. Abner is not interested in making an honest oath, but is seeking to put some muscle behind his threat and to get Ish-bosheth to quake in his boots. We see that he accomplishes this but only to bring a curse upon himself.

Abner is like every unbeliever who finds God to be convenient and to be called in when it suits. Abner is using God not serving God. This happens every day all over the world. People cry out to God in prayer when there is an emergency but have no desire to worship Him, to give up sin, to see His name honoured, or do His will. Some use God as a crutch as part of a recovery program and then put Him away. Some use God as a way to teach their children morals but don't see any place for Him in adult life. In this instance Abner is showing what is called a mercenary spirit.² He is self-serving not fighting the true cause of the war. It is like the boy who saved his friend from falling through the ice on a lake, but when asked how he could risk his life and be so brave, he responded, 'I had to, he was wearing my skates.'

So Abner goes and gathers the elders of Israel, meets with David and orchestrates a plan for David to be king over all Israel, v12. But David will do nothing until his wife Michal is returned. Notice in v18 how Abner once again employs religion when it suits him, 'Now then bring it about, for the LORD has promised David, saying, 'By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines, and from the hand of all their enemies.'" Abner is a perfect example of a hypocrite here, he uses the truth of God to motivate others but it has not motivated himself. We find it easy to use the truth and reality of God to argue for how others should act but when it comes to our own actions we have layers of excuses, we have impenetrable walls, we have distinctions and qualifications to suit our tastes. Abner has been compared to Simon Magus in Acts 8. Simon had been prominent before Philip the evangelist came along. When Simon saw the apostles laying hands on people and they received the Spirit he offered to buy this ability from Peter. This would be the thing that would get him back into the limelight. In the same way we are seeing Abner using God, using His promises, trying to manipulate the people of God through their faith to do his bidding, which was to get himself back into a prominent position, this time in David's government.

What a sad picture. Abner was such a gifted man, it is apparent that he had gifts in the area of leading men, of strategizing, he was energetic, wise and brave. He could have been such an asset in David's kingdom, the Lord could have done much through him, but instead it all got wasted as he channelled it into his own agenda. And here is the great irony. God did use Abner to unite the kingdom for David. Abner was the means by which the nation united to accept David as king. Although Abner did not believe the promise himself or at least act in accordance with it, God uses Abner to bring it to pass.

We see Abner given safe passage after sealing the deal with David, having done all the work in the background, and then he is murdered by Joab. The kingdom of God seemed vulnerable and to be frustrated by a man who was self-promoting, but it is God's will that triumphs.

Joab

So Abner sets off to unite all Israel, to end a civil war, to bring the longed for peace, and then Joab arrives. David had sent Abner away in peace, that is under a type of king's

² Davis, p38.

protection, but Joab is not happy, v24-25, 'Then Joab went to the king and said, "What have you done? Behold, Abner came to you. Why is it that you have sent him away, so that he is gone? 25 You know that Abner the son of Ner came to deceive you and to know your going out and your coming in, and to know all that you are doing."

Joab is David's nephew and the leader of David's forces. But more important to understand in this chapter is that he is the brother of Asahel. It was Abner who had killed Asahel in battle. Joab is a man out for revenge. He has accused Abner of deception, but then this is the very thing he employs as he sends messengers to Abner to return, v26. The path of revenge is a path that justifies many sins, it is a path that is fixated on the sins of others and cannot see them in ourselves. We are never so dishonest about our own sins when we are seeking revenge for wrongs against us from others.

Joab's actions are very selfish. Here is the man who is going to end the civil war, yet he must kill him in revenge. His personal war loomed larger in his heart than the 7 ½ year civil war in Israel. We have all done this. We have kept grudges against others in the church and ruined the unity of Christ's church. We have satisfied our desire to slander someone's name rather than keep the peace.

Now some may want to defend Joab at this point. Some might want to claim the right of the avenger of blood. This was a provision in the law of Moses where a traditional practice of a blood relative exacting justice for a murder was permitted. However, God made other provisions. God ordered there to be cities of refuge to be set up. These cities of refuge were for those who had committed manslaughter and sought refuge from the maniac revenge of the avenger of blood. The person could live in that city safe from vigilante justice. If the high priest were to die, all the people who were living in cities of refuge would receive an automatic pardon, and they were legally allowed to leave the cities and face no vigilante justice but were safe. This is a fantastic picture of Christ who is our Highpriest who has won the release for us by His death. Justice can no longer come hunting us because our Highpriest has died and paid for our crimes by His death. Hebron was one of these cities of refuge. Some might want to argue that Joab had the right of the avenger of blood, but this would be wrong on two counts. Firstly, Abner was in a city of refuge where men were safe from the avenger of blood. And secondly, Asahel had died on the battle field, not in a private dispute.

But revenge is not a thinker but a feeler. The reality of pain not principle is the driving force behind action. Excuses are readily seized from the air; any arguments offered by any are accepted as cover for vengeance. Joab felt that killing Abner for a fair fight against Asahel, was more important than reuniting Israel and stopping the killing of many others. The blindness of revenge! Beware this liar in your own hearts!

It is possible there is another motive in Joab. Abner was Joab's counterpart in Saul's armies. He was older, more experienced as well as a very competent politician. It is very possible that Joab feared for his position as leader of David's armies. If revenge was a cover and this his motive, then he put his position ahead of peace. And he is horse being whipped by the chariot of blind ambition.

You would think that this would be the folly that would destroy the kingdom, but God's wisdom is greater than man's folly. His determination to fulfil His promises more powerful than the suicidal tendencies of vengeance or ambition. David will become king despite the folly of the leader of his armies.

David

During the power struggle we have David. And it is not clear whether he is a shining example of godly kingship. Cracks begin to show under the strain of these strong tides. Several of his actions should be noted. Firstly, we see that he demands his first wife Michal back, 3:13. What do you think of this? Here we are 10 years later after David had fled from Saul and Michal had been married off by Saul to Paltiel. Legally speaking David was within his rights. In the ancient world if a man went to war, was thought to be dead by the wife and she remarried, and she even had children by a new husband. If the man returned he could take his wife and the children as his. David could be applying a well-known practice. But there may be some other motives here. It is possible that David is making a political move not a religious one. If David still loved Michal and wanted to honour the God made marriage then wonderful, this is a story of godly love and commitment. But could it be that David thought a child by the house of David and Saul would be a good way to unite the two houses. Could it be that this was merely a political move and Michal was only a pawn? We are not told. But no children resulted from this reunion and no heir of Saul took the throne of Israel.

Secondly, we have much made of David's reaction to Abner's murder. David claims his innocence and a curse on Joab's family, v28-29, 'Afterward, when David heard of it, he said, "I and my kingdom are forever guiltless before the LORD for the blood of Abner the son of Ner. 29 May it fall upon the head of Joab and upon all his father's house, and may the house of Joab never be without one who has a discharge or who is leprous or who holds a spindle or who falls by the sword or who lacks bread!"' David ordered mourning for Abner and for Joab to be involved, and David took up the place of prominence in the procession. You will notice in 3:31 it says, 'And King David followed the bier.' This is the first time King David is used of David and is significant as Abner was the last real hurdle to David's ascendancy. David wrote a lament, and fasted under oath. This proved to the people his innocence in what would otherwise have appeared to be a clever political move to secure the throne. It would ordinarily have been the duty of the king to judge this a murder case and punish the offender but David does not. Is this because it is a day of mourning and will not? It is because Joab is family? Is it because he fears how the armies would react to their general being punished? We don't know but David does not act except to speak oaths and hand them over to God's vengeance. Joab will repeat his behaviour, and it will be Solomon who will have to put him to death for his crimes. In 1 Kings 2:5-6 David tells his son Solomon to avenge Joab for his crimes.

Chapter four is the account of how Ish-bosheth is murdered by Rechab and Baanah. They killed him while he was sleeping and cut off his head and took it to David. Notice how these men phrase their deed and how David responds. v8-11, 'And they said to the king, "Here is the head of Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul, your enemy, who sought your life. The LORD has avenged my lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring." 9 But David answered Rechab and Baanah his brother, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, "As the LORD lives, who has redeemed my life out of every adversity, 10 when one told me, 'Behold, Saul is dead,' and thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and killed him at Ziklag, which was the reward I gave him for his news. 11 How much more, when wicked men have killed a righteous man in his own house on his bed, shall I not now require his blood at your hand and destroy you from the earth?' They covered their crime as doing God's work to avenge David and make him king. But David credits God with being able to rescue him without having the need of these crimes. These men who attempted to establish the kingdom through injustice are punished.

Politics is a dirty business and anywhere men are involved in seeking God's kingdom these are some of the activities we will encounter. Men who serve God as a way to serving self, men who are so blinded by their own agendas they do destruction to God's church, men who justify their sins in the name of pragmatism. But in all of this God will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.