

Message #19

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Life of David

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DAVID AND DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CHARACTERS

IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF GOD'S KINGDOM

2 SAMUEL 3

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

In 1946 a national survey rated General Douglas MacArthur as “the greatest living American.” As the architect of American success in the Pacific theater in WW II, MacArthur was put in charge of American and United Nations forces in the Korean War.

Harry Truman did not enjoy the same level of popularity. He became President when FDR died in 1945. In his first election to that high office, he was not expected to win. The day after the election he famously held up the front page of the *Chicago Tribune*, which announced “Dewey Defeats Truman.”

South Korean and American troops were forced into a small pocket in the southern part of the country early in the Korean War. General MacArthur pulled off a stunning and risky amphibious landing near Seoul, which largely cut off the invading North Koreans. As MacArthur's UN forces began to push back the Communists, he argued for total victory.

Truman, on the other hand, had more limited goals. He was concerned that Chinese and Soviet involvement could lead to another world war. Truman and MacArthur had a disagreement over goals and strategies in this conflict. There was a meeting that the two had on Wake Island in the Pacific, in which the general assured the president that China would stay out of the conflict. Shortly after that thousands and thousands of Chinese soldiers streamed across the border with North Korea. MacArthur sent a letter to the Republican leader of the House of Representatives, which, of course, got out to the press. MacArthur was very critical of President Truman and his strategy.

Five days later, Truman fired General MacArthur. The war hero returned home to the US and received a ticker tape parade in New York City. Truman's approval rating in national polls plummeted to 22%, the

lowest rating for a president in the modern era. He ended up not running for reelection in 1952. In the judgment of historians, however, Truman did the right thing for the country. University of Texas historian H. W. Brands writes, **“The courage of Truman’s decision had never been in question; six decades later, its wisdom was apparent as well.”** (*The General vs. The President: MacArthur and Truman at the Brink of Nuclear War*, 2016)

In our efforts to promote the kingdom of God, and to do what is right for the cause of Christ, we likewise occasionally encounter difficult characters. They are supposed to be on the same team, but sometimes it seems like they are fighting against the cause. The passage before us today has lessons about how we should respond.

We saw last week in #2 of 2 Samuel that the death of King Saul has brought David into kingship. But initially he is king only over his own tribe of Judah in the south of Israel. The rest of the country, dominated by the Philistines, is led by Abner, who was the commander-in-chief under King Saul. Toward the end of this seven and a half year period where David is ruling in Hebron in Judah, Abner appoints Ish-bosheth, the lone surviving son of Saul, to be king in the north.

I.

We take up the story then in vv. 1-5 of 2 Samuel #3 as we consider Roman numeral I in my outline, DAVID AND DEALING WITH HIS OWN SHORTCOMINGS. According to v. 1, **“There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker.”** This is a summary statement of the political situation that was present during this seven and a half year period when David ruled in Judah from Hebron.

Verses 2-5 tell us, **“And sons were born to David at Hebron: his firstborn was Amnon, of Ahinoam of Jezreel; and his second, Chileab, of Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel; and the third, Absalom the son of Maacah the daughter of Talmai king of Geshur; and the fourth, Adonijah the son of Haggith; and the fifth, Shephatiah the son of Abital; and the sixth, Ithream, of Eglah, David's wife. These were born to David in Hebron.”**

In the cultural setting of the Ancient Near East one measure of the power of a ruler was the size of the royal family. David’s house is growing stronger. Here six wives and six sons are identified. I suspect that these were only the oldest sons of each of these wives. Probably they had other sons and daughters.

This is also a kind of line of succession to the throne. Amnon is first in line, followed by Chileab and then Absalom.

We know little about most of these wives. There was an entire chapter back in 1 Samuel--- #25--- that explained how Abigail came to be his wife. We are told a little bit here about Maacah, the daughter of Talmai. Talmai was king of Geshur, which was a small kingdom to the northeast of the Sea of Galilee. The usual practice was that the king of the more powerful kingdom would marry off his daughter to the king of a weaker kingdom to cement an alliance between those two countries. Thus David was probably the weaker ruler at this time. He had just come into possession of this one tribe in Israel and was yet to consolidate his rule over a larger kingdom.

Of the six sons listed in these verses, three will have significance in the story of David's life. The second son, Chileab disappears from the scene. The suspicion is that he died in childhood. Amnon is heir to the throne. He is going to cause a problem later on. Absalom will end up killing Amnon and will try to force his father out of his kingship. Later Adonijah will try to lay claim to the throne when David has declared that Solomon should be the next ruler.

The underlying issue here is that having all of these wives is contrary to the prescriptive will of God, the will of God that rulers are responsible to follow. In Deuteronomy #17 Moses lays out the rules that kings are to follow when a kingdom is eventually established in the land of promise. According to v. 17 of #17, **“And he [the king] shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.”** The pattern laid out for marriage in Genesis is one man and one woman, and kings are not excluded from this design.

There are going to be problems that come to David because of his violation of this standard. It is evident that the cultural standards for kings prevail over what God's standards are. At the same time we need to keep in mind that God's evaluation of David is that he is a man after God's own heart. So how do we judge this? The positive thing that we can take away is that God can use sinful people in the advance of His kingdom program. There is hope, therefore, for people like us. We are also reminded that even Biblical heroes fall short of God's standards. We need to guard against idolizing anyone.

The other question that we need to ask ourselves is this: Where in our lives are the standards of culture prevailing over what is right Biblically? Two hundred years from now, where will Christians look back at our generation and say, “How could those American evangelicals have missed it so badly?” I don't claim to know. I can only toss out ideas. Will they wonder how we could watch the things that we watch on TV

or on the computer? Will they wonder how we could spend money in the way that we did? Could they wonder how we put country before God? Could they wonder how we gave so much attention to sports, or movies, or video games? Perhaps it will be something else that will cause them to wonder at our behavior.

The larger point is that for us who are interested in promoting God's kingdom in this world, we need to realize that we will encounter difficult characters, people who work against God's kingdom purposes. Before we focus on them, we may need to start with us. Where am I falling short of God's standards? How am I limiting God's kingdom program? The realization of our own flaws and weaknesses should cause us to proceed with humility.

II.

The second section of our passage, vv. 6-21, I have labeled DAVID AND DEALING WITH ABNER. Look at v. 6: **“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 Saul's cousin and commander-in-chief of the army of Israel. He was a supporter of Saul and an enemy of David. He survived the big battle against the Philistines. After building a power base, he appointed Ish-bosheth to be king.

We saw in #2 that Abner was involved with a fight against Joab, David's commander-in-chief and nephew. We are not told how many people were involved in that incident. But we are given the death totals. Only twenty of Joab's men were killed, but 360 of Abner's men died. One of those killed among the forces of Joab was Asahel, his brother.

According to v. 7, **“Now Saul had a concubine whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. And Ish-bosheth said to Abner, ‘Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?’”** Women in the royal harem belonged to the king. Ish-bosheth would have inherited the harem of his father when he became king. To mess around with women belonging to the king could be regarded as treasonous. If a powerful man was involved, it could be regarded as an effort to claim the throne. I don't get the impression that this was Abner's motive here. He seems to be shocked and offended that Ish-bosheth is upset with him. So my interpretation is that this was just an affair that Abner had involving a woman with whom he had a particular interest.

Verse 8: **“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.” Abner does not actually admit messing around with this woman. He is obviously upset with Ish-bosheth’s charge. He uses the term for love often used in regard to a covenant. He says that he has been loyal to his covenant commitment to the family of Saul.

In vv. 9-11 Abner continues, **“God do so to Abner and more also, if I do not accomplish for David what the Lord has sworn to him, 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.’ And Ish-bosheth could not answer Abner another word, because he feared him.”** Dan was in the north of Israel, and Beersheba was in the south. The distance between them is about 150 miles. Abner is describing the entirety of Israel, from the north to the south.

Notice that Abner is fully aware that God has declared that David should be king over Israel. So he is, in effect, admitting that he has been opposing God’s will and His kingdom plan. Why is he changing his attitude now? Revenge and anger seems to be his immediate motive. Perhaps he is also hoping for a position of power in David’s kingdom. Abner’s intentions produce in Ish-bosheth an immediate fear.

Verse 12: **“And Abner sent messengers to David on his behalf, saying, ‘To whom does the land belong? Make your covenant with me, and behold, my hand shall be with you to bring over all Israel to you.’”** Abner poses an ambiguous question: To whom does the land belong? The correct theological answer is that the land belongs to God, but it has been designated for the human leadership of David. In human terms, most of the land has been under the control of Abner.

So in effect, Abner seems to be saying, “Let’s make a deal.” We are not told what Abner wants out of the deal, but we have seen from his character which has been displayed that he probably wants some position of power in the new administration. Maybe he wants to be commander-in-chief of the army.

Verse 13: **“And he said, ‘Good; I will make a covenant with you. But one thing I require of you; that is, you shall not see my face unless you first bring Michal, Saul's daughter, when you come to see my face.’”** Michal was Saul’s younger daughter who was given to David when the latter killed 200 Philistines in double fulfillment of the bride price required by Saul. In #18 v. 20 of 1 Samuel we were told, **“Now Saul’s daughter Michal loved David. And they told Saul, and the thing pleased him.”** Soon after that they were married, David had to flee for his life, and Michal remained in the royal capital. At some point the king married her off to another man.

Now David wants her back. He has six wives already, but he has a legitimate claim upon Michal in that they were truly married, and there was never any divorce. Why does David make this demand now, as part of this agreement with Abner? Perhaps it is a test of Abner's ability to deliver the kingdom. If he can deliver the sister of Ish-bosheth, then he really does have enough power to hand over control of the other tribes of Israel. By having Michal with him, David might also be able to win support from Saul's tribe of Benjamin. Perhaps having a son through Michal would allow there to be a king who would unite both royal houses and bring the whole country together.

According to vv. 14-16, **"Then David sent messengers to Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, saying, 'Give me my wife Michal, for whom I paid the bridal price of a hundred foreskins of the Philistines.' And Ish-bosheth sent and took her from her husband Paltiel the son of Laish. But her husband went with her, weeping after her all the way to Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, 'Go, return.' And he returned."**

There are two noteworthy things about these verses. One is that David sends the request directly to Ish-bosheth, and the king agrees to the request. He apparently feels compelled to give up the kingdom and to go along with Abner's deal. He must feel that his life is on the line if he does not comply. The second thing is that Michal has remarried.

On one hand it seems like a nasty and cruel thing to do to take Michal away from her husband who has been with her longer than David was, and who truly loves her. David has six wives already. But then Michal was rightfully David's wife. He had never given her up. This Paltiel guy was certainly connected to King Saul's administration. He must have been aware of God's promises to David. He must have known David, and he must have known that Michal was married to David. So he was morally wrong to have married Michal, and he was aware of the risk that he was taking on in marrying her. The other sad aspect of the whole deal is Michal herself. Was she just being treated like a pawn in these matters? Or did she have some responsibility in all of this?

Verses 17-19: **"And Abner conferred with the elders of Israel, saying, 'For some time past you have been seeking David as king over you. 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 also spoke to Benjamin. And then Abner went to tell David at Hebron all that Israel and the whole house of Benjamin thought good to do."** Again we see that Abner was aware of God's kingdom plan. He has just been opposing it. Now he has his own plan. Because he is a self-promoter, he is certainly expecting to get something out of the deal.

The promise of God cited in v. 18 is not specifically recorded in the Bible. It is consistent with what we know of God's promises to David. Perhaps this was a promise given through Samuel or another prophet which is not otherwise recorded in the Scriptures.

The enmity of the Philistines was the number one foreign policy concern throughout this time period. After the defeat of the Israelites in the battle in which Saul and his three sons were killed, the Philistines controlled the northern part of the kingdom. When Abner felt strong enough to put forward another king, he did it in the eastern side of the Jordan River, at the point in Israel furthest away from Philistia.

Now Abner is promoting this new kingdom plan to the political leadership of Israel. He is giving special attention to the tribe of Benjamin, of which Saul was a part.

The story continues in vv. 20 & 21: **“When Abner came with twenty men to David at Hebron, David made a feast for Abner and the men who were with him. And Abner said to David, ‘I will arise and go and will gather all Israel to my lord the king, that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may reign over all that your heart desires.’ So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace.”** This appears to be a formal ceremony where this new agreement is being ratified. Abner goes away in peace, implying that the state of conflict which previously existed between Judah and the northern tribes has ended. It looks like the reunification of the kingdom is set.

Abner has been an opponent of God's kingdom program. He may have wrong motives now, but the right result seems to be coming to pass. David is willing to go along with this change. Absalom is a self-promoter. He seems to be adopting this plan for selfish reasons. He wants revenge toward Ish-bosheth, and he wants an important part in this new kingdom arrangement. He is a self-promoter.

A few years ago there was a huge megachurch in the Seattle area that fell apart. The pastor was a very charismatic guy who was a very effective speaker. But then he wrote a new book, and it came out that he, along with some leaders of the church, spent more than \$200,000 of the church's money to buy up copies of the book so that it would get put onto the *New York Times* bestseller list. He came across as a self-promoter. In the end his actions appeared to harm the advance of the kingdom of God.

In the little epistle of 1 John the apostle warns against such self-promoters. He says in vv 9 & 10, **“I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.”** So we need to be on guard against any of these tendencies in ourselves, and we are not to cater to those around us who use Christianity and their church involvement to promote their own agendas.

III.

Verses 22-39, Roman numeral III in my outline, describe DAVID AND DEALING WITH JOAB. According to vv. 22 & 23, **“Just then the servants of David arrived with Joab from a raid, bringing much spoil with them. But Abner was not with David at Hebron, for he had sent him away, and he had gone in peace. When Joab and all the army that was with him came, it was told Joab, ‘Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he has let him go, and he has gone in peace.’”**

It would appear that this meeting with Abner was a pretty big deal. Why would David not have his commander-in-chief present for the feast that celebrated the ratification of this important new arrangement? David had to know about the bad blood that existed between Joab and Abner. He would have received a report, probably from Joab himself, about the killing of Joab’s brother by Abner. David may well have been making promises to Abner about his position in the new government. I doubt that David wanted Joab around for this event. He recognized that Joab could disrupt the whole deal. So now Joab finds out something about this meeting and learns that peace has been established. But Joab is not ready for the conflict to be over.

We learn in vv. 24 & 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? 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.’”** Obviously Joab doesn’t trust Abner. But he is also still wanting revenge. For Joab the war is not over until Abner is dead. We are not told what David said in response to Joab’s complaint.

Verses 26 & 27: **“When Joab came out from David's presence, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the cistern of Sirah. But David did not know about it. And when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the midst of the gate to speak with him privately, and there he struck him in the stomach, so that he died, for the blood of Asahel his brother.”**

Abner killed Joab's brother Asahel by stabbing him in the stomach with a spear. But that was in the context of a war, and Abner acted in self-defense. The text makes it clear that peace has now been established. Thus Joab is guilty of murder.

We read in vv. 28-30, **"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. 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!' So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner, because he had put their brother Asahel to death in the battle at Gibeon."**

David is right to be upset. Not only is Joab guilty of murder for an act that was done in war in a situation of self-defense, he has violated the will of his king, he has threatened the unification of the kingdom, and he has made David look like he is behind the killing of Abner. Verse 30 indicates that Abishai also shares responsibility for this wrongdoing. He probably knew what Joab was going to do and perhaps encouraged him in it.

Why does David not treat Joab like a murderer? Why does he not have him killed or locked up or at least fired from his job? Skip down to v. 39. I prefer the NASV translation of this verse where David says, **"I am weak today, though anointed king; and these men the sons of Zeruiah are too difficult for me. May the Lord repay the evildoer according to his evil."**

Joab and his brother Abishai are David's nephews. More importantly, they have been big supporters of David's rule. They are leaders of the army and probably have strong support there. David's administration is still young, and his government, from David's perspective, is not strong enough for David to dump Joab and Abishai. That might just produce further division.

David does pronounce a curse upon Joab and his family. He calls for physical problems to come upon Joab and his descendants, as well as death by the sword and hunger. The reference to holding a spindle involves making cloth, which was women's work. It would be sickness or injury that might put a man in a position where he would have to do this.

Verses 31 & 32 describe what happens next: **"Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, 'Tear your clothes and put on sackcloth and mourn before Abner.' And King David followed**

the bier. They buried Abner at Hebron. And the king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept.” To make Joab do this would be humiliating to him. David seems to have genuine respect for Abner. There was also a public relations angle to this demonstration of grief. A public demonstration of genuine grief was necessary to prove to the people of the north that David was not complicit in the murder of Abner.

Verses 33-34: **“And the king lamented for Abner, saying, ‘Should Abner die as a fool dies? Your hands were not bound; your feet were not fettered; as one falls before the wicked you have fallen.’ And all the people wept again over him.”** Abner was killed like a criminal, but he was not a criminal. It was a wrongful death.

Verses 35-36: **“Then all the people came to persuade David to eat bread while it was yet day. But David swore, saying, ‘God do so to me and more also, if I taste bread or anything else till the sun goes down!’ And all the people took notice of it, and it pleased them, as everything that the king did pleased all the people.”**

The mark of David is that most of the time he seeks to do the right thing. This has a good effect upon the people whom he leads. People want their leaders to promote truth and justice.

Finally, vv. 37-39: **“So all the people and all Israel understood that day that it had not been the king's will to put to death Abner the son of Ner. And the king said to his servants, “Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel? And I was gentle [or perhaps “weak”] today, though anointed king. These men, the sons of Zeruiah, are more severe than I. The Lord repay the evildoer according to his wickedness!”**

David was showing respect toward Abner. But was Abner really a prince and a great man? Well, he was a royal official, and he was a powerful man. We have seen that Abner was a self-promoter, and he had opposed God’s revealed will. For seven and a half years he had played a large part in preventing the reunification of the country.

David was perhaps seeking to be diplomatic and generous for the purpose of promoting a reunification of the country. Occasionally I have been involved in leading funeral services for people who were not very well liked. One of the first funerals that I did, which was many years ago, was for a father and a husband who was not very well liked by his own family. I had never met the man. He did not identify as

a Christian. By all reports he was nasty to his wife and daughter. I heard little said that was positive about him. But as a pastor who is charged with providing comfort to the deceased member's family and friends, I thought that I had to be as diplomatic and positive as I could be without being untruthful. Perhaps there was something like that involved for David in these circumstances.

Joab is going to continue to be a challenge for David. At times Joab will be a support and a help and a source of wisdom. At other times his character flaws will show through. Here Joab was seeking revenge. I suspect that he also felt threatened. Joab knew that David was making some kind of deal with Abner, who was also a military guy. Maybe David was already bugged enough by Joab that he was promising Abner his job. If Abner was a self-promoter, Joab was into self-protection.

Sometimes that can be an issue in God's kingdom work. People at work, or in the family, or at church can block God's kingdom purposes because they are trying to protect their own position. Because of that, they will attack and criticize others whom they perceive to be a threat to their position.

What we need in the advance of God's kingdom is a proper mix of truth and justice, and grace. David could have sought to do in Abner, because of his self-promotion and opposition to God's kingdom plans. He also could have wiped out Joab because of his self-protection and deeds that threatened God's kingdom plans. David did curse him, but he also exhibited a certain grace. Joab had the opportunity to straighten up.

Fortunately we serve a king who has a perfect balance between truth and justice, and grace. That is the story of the gospel, isn't it? Jesus as the God-man satisfied God's righteous demands for the payment of sin. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. He rose again from the dead to show that He was indeed God. Now He offers us grace. If we simply accept the gift of eternal life that he offers us by faith in Him, we will be forgiven. We will have eternal life.