

# THE PRINCE OF PEACE

2 Samuel 3:22-39

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, Nov. 14, 2010

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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 today, though anointed king” (2 Sam. 3:38-39).

2 Samuel chapters 2 to 5 relate a crucial transition period in the life and ministry of King David. It was a period that began with David returning home from a lengthy exile among the Philistines and ends with David securely established on Israel’s throne and preparing to dedicate his holy city. Such turning points will often revolve on decisive moments that reveal the true character of a leader. For David, the key moment occurred when his general, Joab, slew the rebel commander, Abner. David’s conduct in this affair revealed to all what kind of rule he would establish: would David pursue a spiritual reign of peace or a fleshly regime of selfish revenge and exploitation? 2 Samuel 3:22-39 provides the answer and reveals David as a prince of peace who was fitting to serve as a foretype of the true peacemaker, Jesus Christ. Moreover, David sets an example to all leaders in the church today of how to overcome evil with good and employ love to cover a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8).

## AN ENEMY OF PEACE

How quickly things can go amiss in a sinful world like ours. In 2 Samuel 3:21, David sends his former foe, Abner, away on an errand of peace that will gain him a throne. But in verse 22, Joab returns to the stage of our narrative, arriving with the spoils of a successful raid. Abner had already “gone in peace,” when Joab learned of David’s successful negotiation with their hated rival.

“Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he has let him go, and he has gone in peace,” Joab was told (2 Sam. 3:23). It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words, but here is a case where just a few words paint a very clear picture. We can easily imagine the shock, confusion, and outrage that must have decorated Joab’s face! Any doubt as to his response was removed when he burst in on his king: “What have you done? Behold, Abner came to you. Why is it that you have sent him away, so that he is gone?” (2 Sam. 3:24).

Joab represent the kind of person who is always a barrier to peace. We can see three reasons why he was opposed to David’s acceptance of Abner’s peace initiative. The first was that Joab simply did not think it possible for a man like Abner sincerely to act honestly. After all, had not Abner just betrayed the son of Saul whom he had put on the throne of the northern tribes? Wasn’t this Saul’s henchman during all the years when David was persecuted? The idea that a man of Abner’s well-established vices might honestly sue for peace was more than Joab could believe.

Second, it seems likely that Joab was anxious over the possibility that Abner might supplant his place as David’s military chief, and that he was envious of David’s enthusiasm for Abner’s counsels. We are not told of any agreement between David and Abner regarding a position in David’s regime, but it is reasonable to assume there was some understanding in this direction. With this in mind, not only was Joab concerned about Abner for David’s sake but also for his own sake. Wasn’t it more likely, he would have reasoned, that Abner had approached David in order to secure his own interests rather than for the well-being of the nation?

Third, we remember that Abner had slain Joab’s brother Asahel when that young man had refused to give up pursuing Abner after the battle of Gibeon (2 Sam. 2:18-23). For this reason, Joab hated Abner and could not accept any charitable thoughts regarding his enemy. Joab may have considered himself duty-bound to maintain a blood-feud with Abner, even though God’s law did not define killing in battle as murder.

## AN INFAMOUS MURDER

Armed with these reasons to oppose David's peace plan, Joab hatched his own scheme. Sending a messenger, Joab summoned Joab back to David's base at Hebron. Abner must have thought himself safe under the king's protection, and he may have thought that Joab's message was sent on David's behalf, though verse 26 assures us that "David did not know about it." Joab's dastardly plot was concluded quickly: "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" (2 Sam. 3:27-28).

Joab's murder of Abner was a vile deed on many levels. It was cowardly to slay a man under the pretense of peace and outrageous to strike so maliciously under a cloak of hospitality. "If there had been a drop of reason and humanity in him," writes John Calvin, "he ought to have stopped himself from committing such cruelty."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Joab's violence imperiled the peace that could unite the Israelites so as to stand as one against the enemy Philistines. Obsessed with hatred, Joab callously disregarded the well-being of the people he was commissioned to serve. Self-justified in his passion for revenge, Joab acted without any counsel other than that of his equally vengeful brother Abishai (see 3:30).

To be specific, Joab sinned because he would not submit to the authority established over him by God. We see this in his arrogant treatment of his king. William Blaikie comments: "His rudeness to David is highly offensive. He speaks to him in the tone of a master to a servant, or in the tone of those servants who rule their master."<sup>2</sup> Joab demanded of his king, "What have you done?... Why is it that you have sent him away?" (2 Sam. 3:24). Being unwilling to humble himself to even his king, he was hardly willing to restrain himself according to God's law. Unrestrained in his arrogance, Joab was equally ungoverned in his violent hatred.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel I-13*, trans. Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 125.

<sup>2</sup> Blaikie, *2 Samuel*, 51.

The Bible tells us to “be subject to the governing authorities,” since they have all “been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). In the church, the book of Hebrews says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (13:17). For this reason, those who will lead must first be willing to submit, first to God and then to the authorities God has placed over us in our various relationships in life. If we are unwilling to yield to proper authority, we have already taken the first steps on the path of disobedience and sin and we make ourselves a menace to the peace and well-being of God’s people. At the end of this chapter, David himself complains about trouble caused by unruly Joab and his brother. There is little wonder in this, since Joab was so heedless in undoing the king’s carefully laid plans for so vitally important a matter as the unification of Israel in time of war. Calvin writes: “he prevented David from having peace and all the people from being brought together under their leader, who was ordained for the salvation of the Church.”<sup>3</sup>

Not only was Joab selfish and unruly, but he was his actions were driven by motives of self-serving ambition. Calvin writes that “ambition is the most mortal ambition that can possibly happen to the Church of God, when everyone wants to advance himself and wants to be seen by others.”<sup>4</sup> If we are to have peace and blessing in the church, then Christians must be led by those who are servant-hearted and zealous for the good of God’s people even at their own expense. This was Jesus’ concern when he overheard his disciples arguing about their future order of precedence in the kingdom of God. Jesus gave the following rule: “The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Mt. 23:11-12).

Joab’s problem was that everything he said in contempt of Abner was equally true of himself. With this in mind, we should be wary of condemning Joab’s murderous deed without searching for similarly sinful motives in our hearts. Do we find ourselves quick to criticize the careful, prayerful deliberation of our spiritual leaders? When decisions are made that are plainly contrary to God’s Word, we may

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 129.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

be forced to oppose or reject leaders of churches and denominations. Yet pastors and elders are accustomed to being criticized over matters merely of judgment and prudence in applying God's Word. The matters that divide many churches have little to do with biblical doctrine or ministry, but rather focus on church decorations, music styles, or differences of personality. Paul urges all believers to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). A first step in this direction is a spirit of humility and submission to ordained leadership in the church.

When it comes to Joab's personal ambition, we should likewise be willing to assess the motives of our hearts. Dale Ralph Davis comments that "though I profess to care only about Jesus' kingship, I fear I am far more concerned about my place in his regime than with the honor of his name... under the guise of service in the kingdom I crave all the strokes I can – even as Jesus' expense."<sup>5</sup> If honest self-evaluation reveals similar thoughts within us, we should bring our hearts before the Lord in prayer, asking him to give a different spirit that will promote the peace of his church: a spirit of humility, servant-heartedness, and contented joy.

## A BLESSED PEACEMAKER

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called Sons of God" (Mt. 5:9). David's attempts at peace-making had struck an obstacle before Abner even had an opportunity to deliver David's proposals to the elders of the northern tribes. David's failure was caused not only by Joab's wicked deed but by his own failure to minister peace within his regime.

In retrospect, we can see several mistakes David made that thwarted his ambitions for peace. First, given that Abner had killed Joab's brother in battle, and that Abner and Joab had been pitted against one another as enemies for years, David should have anticipated Joab's reluctance to embrace peace. Likewise, the potential for envy and jealousy between Abner and Joab was so obvious that David failed miserably in taking no steps to bring them together in peace. David's failure reminds us that the reconciling of nations, churches, and other

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<sup>5</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1999), 41.

organizations involves the reconciling of people who usually have reasons for enmity. Having embraced Abner in peace, David needed to be proactive in helping Joab to understand the importance of his plans and in securing his subordinate's agreement.

David might have proposed measures of reconciliation between the rival generals. He had been insistent enough in demanding the return of his wife, Michal, and the redress of the insult of Saul giving her to another man. Why did David not also think of Joab's slain brother Asahel and propose some payment or other form of redress to satisfy Joab's injured honor? The point is that leaders cannot merely issue decrees of peace, either between nations or factions within a church. Peace-making usually involves difficult and prayerful ministry to reconcile embittered parties and put long-held grievances to rest. Furthermore, having given Abner assurances of safety and peace, it was incumbent on David to take action to fulfill this promise, especially when Joab had denounced David's peace and departed in anger. David had an obligation to take positive steps to secure the reality of his peace for those under his care.

Once news reached David about Joab's murder of Abner, however, the king plunged himself fully into redressing this threat to his plans for peace. His first concern was to persuade his former rivals that he had not betrayed Abner but had instead been betrayed by his own general: "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'" (2 Sam. 3:28).

David responded to Abner's murder with two decisive actions. The first was publicly to denounce Joab's sin. Not only did David blame Joab but he pronounced a curse upon Joab and his house: "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!" (2 Sam. 3:29). In David's era of history, sins of prominent Israelites would fall upon their households as well. David calls on God to make Joab's household permanently unclean because of his murder of Abner, and for Joab's male descendants to be so weak as to engage in women's work ("hold a spindle") or die in battle or by starvation.

Notice, however, that for all of David's harsh language, he did not actually render the punishment Joab's sin deserved. Joab could not make the excuse of lawful vengeance, since Asahel's death had come in battle and not through murder. Moreover, Joab killed Abner at Hebron, which was one of the cities of refuge where those under bloodguilt must remain safe until a fair hearing could sort out the matter. In short, Joab could offer no defense against the charge of murder, the punishment for which was death (Gen. 9:6). David, however, did not execute this sentence or even expel Joab from his office. The reason is that David thought he lacked the ability to take strong action against so powerful a figure as Joab. Unable or unwilling to punish Joab himself, David's curses were meant to say that God would not permit Joab's sin to go unpunished, even if David did.

Commentators criticize David for not trusting God to punish his subordinate. While Joab would often serve David well in the years to come, his insubordinate would occur again so that David must have regretted his earlier undecision. It is similarly a mistake when divisive or unruly church leaders are permitted to retain their office without proper discipline, usually on the grounds that the discipline process is too painful and disruptive. Under normal circumstances, it is better faithfully to exercise proper discipline without taking counsel of fears. Perhaps it is true that David simply was not able to reign in Joab completely. If so, we know that he resented Joab from that time onward. Joab's punishment finally came when David was giving his dying instructions to his son and successor, king Solomon. Joab had been implicated in the plot of Adonijah to steal the throne from Solomon, and when David ordered his death for this continued insubordination, he threw in Joab's long-unpunished guilt in the slaying of Abner (1 Ki. 2:5).

David's second action was to bury Abner's body in a state funeral at which David would serve as chief mourner, with Joab marching before the coffin: "David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, 'Tear your clothes and put on sackcloth and mourn before Abner'" (2 Sam. 3:31).

David did four things with respect to the burial of Abner's body that were designed to persuade on-lookers of his complete innocence and

his trustworthiness to make peace. First, he buried Abner in Hebron, perhaps the most honored burial ground in all Israel, where Abraham and the other patriarchs lay in honor. In England, only the most honored citizens are buried within the walls of Westminster Abbey, and American's most honored war dead alone are buried in Arlington cemetery. In this way, instead of reveling in Abner's demise, David shows the highest degree of honor in the treatment of the body.

Second, David himself marched mourning behind Abner's body, with Joab in front walking in torn clothes to express grief. At the destination, "the king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept" (2 Sam. 3:32). It is impossible to know if David was really weeping over his tattered plans and the threat to his cherished throne. Perhaps he genuinely grieved the death of Abner and the loss of so mighty a leader.

Third, David preached an impassioned elegy over the slain leader: "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 (2Sa 3:33-34 ESV)" The point of David's funeral homily was that even Abner did not deserve to die in this manner, slain by Joab as if he was only a fool, as one bound for slaughter rather than dying nobly on the field of battle. Matthew Henry writes, "because [Abner] had been a man of bravery in the field, and might have done great service in the public counsels at this critical juncture, all former quarrels are forgotten and David is a true mourner for his fall... He speaks as one vexed that Abner was fooled out of his life, that so great a man as he, so famed for conduct and courage, should be imposed upon by a colour of friendship, slain by surprise, and so die as a fool dies."<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, David refused to eat bread, fasting as an outward expression of the inward grief he felt. When people came to David offering him food he steadfastly refused it: "God do so to me and more also," he said, "if I taste bread or anything else till the sun goes down!" (2 Sam. 3:35).

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:361.

It may seem to us that David may have been going overboard in the intensity of grief over the death of a man who David could not personally have loved very much (although we should not forget the differences between his culture and ours when it comes to mourning). If David was going overboard it was for a reason: for the sake of the unity of his people, who could scarcely afford a resumption of civil war. As it was, David's conduct at Abner's funeral "erased any question anyone may have had, and what had potential for being very divisive actually served as a unifying event."<sup>7</sup> Verse 37 states, "All the people took notice of it, and it pleased the, as everything that the kind did pleased all the people. So all the people and all Israel understood that day that it had not been the king's wil to put to death Abner the son of Ner."

David realized that to serve God effectively he must not only have a clean conscience before God but also a good reputation before the people who were called to follow him. This is no less true today for leaders in Christ's church, which is why elders are required to have proven themselves by sound management of their households and must be well thought of not only by fellow Christians but by outsiders as well (1 Tim. 3:5-7). David was concerned enough about his duty as a leader that he even sought to inculcate a spirit of moderation and charity among his officials and servants. He said to them, "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?" (2 Sam. 3:38). If David's vision for Israel was that of a people united in service to God, then he must be a peace-maker among God's people and one whose commitment to God's Word was evident to all.

## THE PRINCE OF PEACE

Through his sacrificial commitment to peace among God's people, David was a fitting forerunner of his greater descendant, Jesus Christ, who was foretold as the true "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). Walter Chantry writes: "In the midst of all the shameful deeds of Abner and Joab, God was... establishing an ancestor of Christ upon a throne unlike those of other kingdoms. This throne would endure forever and would be used to save multitudes and nations

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth L. Chafin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The Preacher's Commentary, vol. 8 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 2.

from their sins.”<sup>8</sup> Psalm 45, perhaps the greatest of the coronation psalms in the Bible, looks through David to see the true and great peacemaker in Jesus Christ: “The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions” (Ps. 45:6-7). It is in the righteousness of his perfect person that Jesus brings a true peace to his people, so that true and eternal gladness reign in his kingdom.

We should sympathize with David’s attempts at peace-making because of the overwhelming obstacles that he faced. We can see in this account three great obstacles that stand in the way of any human attempt at peace. The first is the enmity and sin within the human heart. Why is there constant bloodshed on the earth and ceaseless discord among men? The Bible answers: “There is no one righteous, no, not one;... Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known” (Rom. 3:10, 15-17). This is why Joab was so willing to violate David’s attempt at peace, and why resentment, anger, and hatred reign in all of human society. As Paul concluded, “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:18).

Second, there is not only sin reigning in the human heart but there are grudges and past grievances that ensure an on-going alienation between even fellow countrymen and worshipers of the same God. So it was between Joab and Abner: not only Abner’s many years of persecuting David and his followers, but especially his brutal slaying of Joab’s brother produced an enmity that inevitably expressed itself in murder. Likewise, there is virtually no one who has lived any length of time who cannot name others with whom they might easily be estranged because of the other’s or their own past sins.

Third, there is little peace on earth because of competing agendas among mankind. Joab wanted to advance his own cause and thought little of David’s concern for the unity of the entire nation. This same source of discord appears commonly within churches, just as Jesus’ disciples bickered over their personal agendas even while gathered at the Last Supper on the night of Christ’s arrest ().

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Chantry, *David: Man of Prayer, Man of War* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2007), 148.

If you add up all these woes that tear the fellowship of mankind apart, you will practically despair of there ever being real peace within a family or a church, much less within an entire society. How can there ever be peace in a world corrupted by sin, violated by past harms, and driven by competition? The answer was not a mere man like king David, though his commitment to peace is praiseworthy. The only answer is that God must send a Savior to bring peace on earth. Only God can heal the breaches rent by human sin.

This was, of course, the very announcement made by the angels on the night of Jesus' birth: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Lk. 2:14). Jesus came to put away the guilt that alienates us from God in heaven, bearing the penalty before God's judgment that our sins deserve. The gracious God reconciles us to himself by the sacrifice of his Son, "making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20). In this way, his people gain not only peace with God but the power of forgiveness and mercy that makes peace among fellow believers possible.

Jesus also sends his Holy Spirit into the hearts of believers to overpower the spirit of enmity and strife within us. This is why the Holy Spirit often appeared to human sight in the form of a dove, the emissary of peace on earth. We now have, in Christ, the power of his reign of peace. Paul listed the fruit of the Spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control," stating that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" and therefore are able to be servants of God's peace (Gal. 5:22-24).

Moreover, when Jesus calls us to himself, bringing us to peace with God and working in us with the Spirit of peace, he also gives his disciples a new agenda that binds them all together as one. Part of the gospel cause to which every Christian is united is the agenda of peace. This is why the New Testament letters literally overflow with the mandate to the pursuing of peace. Paul tells us to "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom.14:19), and urges: "Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Cor. 13:11). The writer of Hebrews commanded his flock: "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will

see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). James taught: “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (Ja. 3:18). And Peter taught: “Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it” (1Pet. 3:10-11).

The Chinese evangelist Watchman Nee tells a story that illustrates this calling. A Christian had his rice field on a hill and he had to hand-work a pump to bring water up from the irrigation stream that ran at the base of the hill. Beneath him was a neighbor who made a hole in the dividing wall so that when the Christian pumped water into his field it drained down into his own. The Christian became understandably frustrated at this repeated theft after several times. Consulting his Christian friends he asked, “What shall I do? I have tried to be patient and not retaliate. Isn’t it right for me to confront him?” The Christians prayed and then one of them noted that as Christians they surely had a duty to seek more than justice for themselves, but to live in such a way as to be a blessing to others.

Armed with this advice, the Christian pursued a different strategy. The next day he went out and first pumped water into his neighbor’s fields and then went on to do the additional labor or watering his own fields. Before long, this procedure brought the neighbor out to ask why the Christian would act in this way, and as a result of the relationship that ensued the neighbor became a Christian himself.<sup>9</sup>

For the believer in Jesus, the basis and the power of peace is Christ himself. For “he himself is our peace,” Paul writes, who has made all believers one “and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14). Sinners may have peace with the very God they have offended through the peace that Jesus gives through his own blood. And it is through born-again Joabs, looking on the Abners of their lives, their hearts melted with the peace of Christ, no longer burning with the fires of resentment and hatred, that Jesus extends, promotes, and offers his peace to a dying, divided, and sin-afflicted world.

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<sup>9</sup> cf. James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 111-112.