
THE BOOK OF 2 SAMUEL

CIVIL WAR

(2 SAMUEL 2:12-32)

The Difference One Man Can Make

Nineveh was a city on a collision course with the temporal judgment of God. Its wickedness had come up before the LORD (Jonah. 1:2). And if Nahum's prophecy, directed towards a Nineveh that walked in the opposite direction of the repentance of their fathers is any indication of the pre-repentant Nineveh of Jonah's day, it was a "bloody city...full of lies and robbery" (cf. Nah. 3:1), not to mention harlotries and sorceries (vs.4). God had been patient. The people of Nineveh had put themselves on the brink of being overthrown. But to remedy their rebellion God gave a simple message to a reluctant and rebellious prophet: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah. 3:4). The result – an awakening. The men of Nineveh believed (vs.5), turned from their evil ways (vs.10), and God did not bring the threatened judgment. And one of the many astounding aspects of that history is how God used one man to be an instrument whereby He changed the trajectory of thousands upon thousands of lives.

That's an example of how one man in the hands of a mighty God can be used for great good; whereas in the passage before us we have an example of how one man, Abner, driven by his self interest, can be a means of great evil. Oh the difference one man can make...

Into the Text

In the previous passage we saw Abner play 'king-maker' in Mahanaim. He took Ishbosheth (vs.8a), "brought him over to Mahanaim" (vs.8b) and "made him king" (vs.9a) over all Israel (vs.9b). Abner, in direct rebellion against God's revealed will to transfer the kingdom from Saul to David, created a rival kingdom that otherwise [naturally speaking] would not have existed. In our passage we will begin to see the difference that unauthorized coronation made.

Verses 12 through 14

¹² Now Abner the son of Ner, and the servants of Ishbosheth the son of Saul, went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon. ¹³ And Joab the son of Zeruiah, and the servants of David, went out and met them by the pool of Gibeon. So they sat down, one on one side of the pool and the other on the other side of the pool. ¹⁴ Then Abner said to Joab, "Let the young men now arise and compete before us." And Joab said, "Let them arise."

First, we notice that Abner is the aggressor. The man who played ‘king maker’ was now dawning the role of troublemaker and instigator. He and the servants of Ishbosheth **went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon**. That phrase “went out” was used in 1 Sam. 18:30 to speak of the Philistines going out to war, and the idea appears to be the same here. By traveling to Gibeon Abner and Co. entered into the territory of the tribe of Benjamin (Josh. 18:25) and, being that Gibeon was near “Gibeah of Saul”, perhaps Abner had intentions of reestablishing the center of Saul’s former authority while garnering further support from the tribe of Benjamin. You get the idea that they were trying to say - the kingdom of Saul lives on. Not exactly a promising proposition. But the people didn’t seem to mind.

As expected, because they were encroaching closer to the territory of Judah, Joab and the servants of David went out and met Abner and his men **by the pool of Gibeon** (vs.13a), a large subterranean reservoir that was about 120 feet long and a 100 feet wide. On either side of this great pool both sides sat down (vs.13b). Note the picture that is painted. See the symmetry. We’ll come back to it shortly. In the meantime, let’s notice a reoccurring theme – Abner is the aggressor. He suggests to Joab that the young men should arise and compete in representative combat (vs.14). Joab was likely under orders of David to simply assume a defensive posture, but Abner offered bait for battle and Joab bit.

Some contend that Abner suggested this mini-tournament in an effort to avoid an all out civil war. Perhaps. But we should not assume that Abner’s intentions were noble. Political? Yes. Noble? No. After all, Abner was the man who was driving the civil war! Furthermore, the idea of representative combat was not outside of the norm of the ancient world. David’s battle against Goliath was a recent example. The purpose of such a form of combat was to minimize the loss of life and maximize the possibility of captured servants. For example, if the Philistines were dwelling in Gibeah and Abner wanted to take them on, it would be in his best interest to preserve as much life as they could for those prospective campaigns. Therefore, he suggested that he and Joab play the role of spectators and watch as their brethren mercilessly fight to the death.

You wouldn’t want to walk a mile in Abner’s shoes; remember, the LORD hates those whose feet run to do evil (Prov. 6:18b). In fact, the Lord tells you via the words of Solomon, “My son, do not walk in the way with them, keep your foot from their path; for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood” (1:15,16). I would imagine that the Psalmist couldn’t make it much clearer than when He wrote, “the one who loves violence His [The LORD’s] soul hates” (Ps. 11:5). Granted, if you’re reading this you probably don’t enjoy starting gang wars or inciting riots in your spare time. You probably haven’t bloodied your knuckles in the past week because some guy gave you a dirty look. But are you entertained by violence? Has the television and couch brought the cruelty of the Roman coliseum into the comfort of your own home? This past Saturday evening (at the time of my writing this, not the time of your reading this) the UFC on FOX drew an audience of over 3 million¹. By the thousands people tuned in to be amused by bloodshed and brutality. Sounds like the kind of thing Abner would have liked... and the kind of thing that God hates.

¹ See <http://www.mmaweekly.com/ufc-on-fox-14-official-tv-ratings-highest-since-january-of-2014>

Noticeable Symmetry

Before we go forward we must take note of the noticeable symmetry that's presented in verses 12 through 14. You can't help but wonder if the inspired narrator is making a point we ought to notice.

First, notice how the introduction to Abner and his men is identical to Joab and his men: "**Now Abner the son of Ner, and the servants of Ishbosheth...**" (vs.12a) compared with, "**And Joab the son of Zeruiah, and the servants of David...**" (vs.13a)

Second, both parties "**went out**" (vs.12b, 13b) from their respective places.

Third, look at the picture painted in the second half of verse 13: "**So they sat down, one on one side of the pool and the other on the other side of the pool.**" The symmetry is unmistakable. It's as though one side was a reflection of the other side.

And finally, in this little periscope, notice Abner and Joab's exchange of words, "**Then Abner said to Joab, 'Let the young men now arise and compete before us.' And Joab said, 'Let them arise'**" (vs.14).

So we see a symmetrical description, symmetrical deployments, symmetrical destinations, a symmetrical standoff, and a symmetrical dialogue. Here's the question I think we are meant to ask, a question that will, perhaps, help clear up some mysterious occurrences that come later on in 2nd Samuel – is Joab the parallel to Abner? What Abner is to Ishbosheth, is Joab to David? Just like Abner has hidden motives for installing Ishbosheth to be king (*see* 2 Sam 3:6-7) does Joab have a hidden agenda? Abner has a king in his pocket; does Joab believe he has a king in his pocket? When we see Joab act devoted to the things of God is that because he is a dutiful general of king David or is it because he is a self-driven, master politician? At least at this point those are questions we ought to leave on the table to prepare the way for further consideration in 2 Samuel.

But for now back to the matter at hand – the first blow in this civil war is about to be struck.

Verses 15 & 16

¹⁵So they arose and went over by number, twelve from Benjamin, *followers* of Ishbosheth the son of Saul, and twelve from the servants of David. ¹⁶And each one grasped his opponent by the head and *thrust* his sword in his opponent's side; so they fell down together. Therefore that place was called the Field of Sharp Swords, which *is* in Gibeon.

This twelve-on-twelve battle resulted in the death of twenty-four men. Once you do that math you can quickly see that not one of them survived; each died in the "Field of Sharp Swords." It's a sad picture that depicts the meaningless loss of life in a nonsensical, sinful, self-driven war. Nothing was settled; but passions were incited.

Verse 17

17 So there was a very fierce battle that day, and Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David.

Since the 12-on-12 battle didn't decide the day, a very fierce battle ensued, and Abner and the men of Israel bore the brunt of the defeat. A little bit later on in the chapter we find out that the men of Judah lost 20 men and the men of Israel lost 360 men. Yes, undeniably the servants of David dealt the servants of Ishbosheth a considerable defeat. But think about it, in the case of a civil war between the people of Israel and Judah, who, at face value, appears to benefit the most? Answer: *The Philistines!* You could imagine the Philistines hearing about the battle that raged at Gibeon, as well as the many others that would follow, and thinking, 'This is great. They're doing our job for us.' Likewise, one has to imagine the perspective of the kingdom of darkness when there is discord and division among the people of God. It's sad and fearful to imagine some demonic exchange that includes words like, 'This is great. They're doing our job for us.' After all, a house divided can't stand. So who is the most dangerous guy [or gal] in the local church? Arguably the implanted tear among the wheat that works to that end, who specializes in angst-dissemination and character assassination. Such a reality helps us better appreciate the blessed role of Spirit-led peacemakers (Mt. 5:9) who pursue the things that make for peace and edification (Rom. 14:19), not strife and division.

Flashback

Now having given us a summary, in typical Hebrew fashion the inspired narrator is about to provide us with a flashback of a significant event within the battle. First, he introduces us to some of the central figures in the forthcoming drama.

Verse 18

18 Now the three sons of Zeruiah were there: Joab and Abishai and Asahel. And Asahel was as fleet of foot as a wild gazelle.

These three men were David's nephews. These three men were mighty warriors. **Joab** was the mighty general who would become the undisputed commander-in-chief of David's army (1 Chr. 11:16). As alluded to earlier, there is mystery surrounding his character for numerous reasons to be seen throughout 2 Samuel. **Abishai** was the one who went with David into the camp of Saul when David had an opportunity to kill the bloodthirsty king (1 Sam. 26:6). Later on in 2 Samuel we find out that he was someone who singlehandedly killed 300 men with a spear in battle (2 Sam. 23:18-19). And, likewise, **Asahel** was known as a mighty warrior (1 Chr. 11:26) who was remarkably fast; the inspired writer even said he was as fast **as a wild gazelle**. Each of these **three men were David's nephews**, the sons of his sister Zeruiah. Don't think that necessarily meant that these men were much younger than David; after all, David was the youngest of eight brothers.

With that the foundation laid, particularly as it relates to Asahel's remarkable speed, the flashback ensued.

Verses 19 through 23

¹⁹ So Asahel pursued Abner, and in going he did not turn to the right hand or to the left from following Abner. ²⁰ Then Abner looked behind him and said, “Are you Asahel?” He answered, “I am.” ²¹ And Abner said to him, “Turn aside to your right hand or to your left, and lay hold on one of the young men and take his armor for yourself.” But Asahel would not turn aside from following him. ²² So Abner said again to Asahel, “Turn aside from following me. Why should I strike you to the ground? How then could I face your brother Joab?” ²³ However, he refused to turn aside. Therefore Abner struck him in the stomach with the blunt end of the spear, so that the spear came out of his back; and he fell down there and died on the spot. So it was *that* as many as came to the place where Asahel fell down and died, stood still.

Persistence isn't *always* a good thing. Asahel showed dogged determination in his relentless pursuit of Abner. He didn't turn to the right hand or to the left hand from following him (vs.19b). After finding out who was indeed following him (and gaining on him) Abner told Asahel to turn aside and take the armor of another soldier as his spoil (vs.21). It was as though Abner was trying to tell Asahel – ‘if you want a trophy it's in your best interest to try and get it somewhere else, from some lesser soldier.’ This also gives you an idea of how close the chase had become. But again we were told, “**Asahel would not turn aside from following him**” (vs.21b). So Abner pleaded with Asahel yet again, telling him to turn aside, and that, should he kill him, he wouldn't be able to face Asahel's brother, Joab (vs.22). You get the idea that Abner knew Joab's grief and fury would be terrible; you even get the sense that, up until this point, there was some kind of ‘honor among generals’ shared between Joab and Abner. Not to mention, Abner, as becomes clear in chapter three, was a political guy, and if he ever thought it was in his best interest to join David's side, having killed Joab's brother could pose a significant problem.

After that plea in verse 22 we are told *yet a third time* that Asahel “**refused to turn aside**” (vs.23). And as result, Abner struck him with the spear, and between the force of the thrust along with the speed at which Asahel was running the blunt end of the spear went right through him and he fell and died on the spot.² When the men of David's army saw this they were in shock; they simply stood at the site and “**stood still**” (vs.23b). This was David's nephew and Joab's brother.

Learning From Asahel's Death

Are there things we ought to learn from Asahel's death? I think so. But first we ought to ask the question – was Asahel's pursuit of Abner really the pursuit of self-glory? Was Asahel carnally seized by the prospect of being the guy who killed Abner and crippled the rival kingdom? We don't know for sure. Abner's remark that Asahel should turn aside and take the armor of a younger man may suggest that Asahel was in pursuit of tokens of valor. He may have simply seen Abner has the fountainhead of this rival kingdom; he may have simply thought that if he took out the man who propped up the pseudo king the pseudo kingdom would collapse.

² Bear in mind that the *blunt* end of the spear may have nonetheless been somewhat pointed so men could place their spear in the ground, see Alexander-Francis Kirkpatrick, *The Second Book of Samuel, Volume 11* (Cambridge: University Press, 1881), 259.

But, if Abner's suggestion and the implication behind it was right, Asahel epitomized the unsuspecting end of those whose aim is personal notoriety.

Even more clearly, Asahel appeared to put undue confidence in his speed. In doing so, you might say, he failed to realize that when we are at our proudest we are the most vulnerable. Recall the following Scriptural examples that illustrate that point:

- *Nebuchadnezzar*. While walking about the royal palace Nebuchadnezzar said to himself, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?" (Dan. 4:30). While the word was still in his mouth a voice fell from heaven to tell Nebuchadnezzar that the kingdom had departed from him and that he would be driven from to the fields as though he were an animal (vs.31b-32).
- *Belshazzar*. It was as Belshazzar was reveling his power and fortune (Dan. 5:1-4) that he was weighed, measured, and found wanting (vs.5,26-27). The handwriting on the wall singled that the party was over and that Belshazzar's kingdom was given to the Medes and Persians. The confirmation of which came that very night as the Medes made their way through walls that appeared impenetrable (vs.30-31) and took Belshazzar's life. The reason again – pride (vs.22).
- *Herod*. It was as Herod Agrippa heard the people say, 'This is the voice of a god and not a man' (Acts 12:22) that he failed to give glory to God and was struck by the angel of the Lord and died shortly after (vs.23)

And the references could go on yet still. The point being: *when we are at our proudest we are the most vulnerable*.

Further Application

Back to the passage at hand, don't forget what appeared to stoke that pride – Asahel's speed. The inspired narrator appears to have drawn our attention to that fact - Asahel was utilizing his ability in the hopes of overtaking Abner. The irony was - he could have ran *from* death but instead he ran *into* death. By way of application for us, Matthew Henry put it well when he said,

"We are often betrayed by the accomplishments we are proud of! Asahel's swiftness, which he presumed so much upon, did him no service, but hastened his end."³

Therefore, let us be careful that our gifts not become impetuses towards pride. Whatever our temporary stewardship is, let us not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Rom. 12:3). Our gifts were given not for our glory, but for the glory of Christ. Therefore, let us esteem ourselves servants to others for Christ's sake, boasting in our weakness against the backdrop of God's strength, and in our spiritual bankruptcy against the backdrop of the Gospel's sufficiency.

³ Matthew Henry, *Short Comments on Every Chapter of the Holy Bible* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1839), 237.

Having reached the sad climax, the inspired narrator now begins to wind down the account of this civil war.

Verse 24a

^{24a} Joab and Abishai also pursued Abner.

Presumably this was no longer simply about defending the kingdom of David; this likely became a matter of retribution.

Verses 24b and 25

^{24b} And the sun was going down when they came to the hill of Ammah, which is before Giah by the road to the Wilderness of Gibeon. ²⁵ Now the children of Benjamin gathered together behind Abner and became a unit, and took their stand on top of a hill.

Though Abner's army had been sorely beaten, the children of Benjamin, either ones who had been scattered or reinforcements, reconstituted themselves behind Abner in the strong military position of the higher ground on top of a hill. Interesting how the self-centered Abner was backed up by the self-centered Benjamites; after all, they had the most to gain from Ishbosheth sitting on the throne. Don't forget what Saul had once said to the Benjamites:

“Hear now, you Benjamites! Will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, and make you all captains of thousands and captains of hundreds?” (1 Sam. 22:7b)

The implication being – ‘Benjamites, you won’t get preferred treatment with David, but you have gotten it and will get it with me.’ It was in the Benjamites interest to have a Benjamite king (i.e. Ishbosheth). So you likely have a picture here of self-driven Benjamites getting behind the self-driven Abner.

From there Abner appealed to Joab for a ‘cease fire’...

Verse 26

²⁶ Then Abner called to Joab and said, “Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that it will be bitter in the latter end? How long will it be then until you tell the people to return from pursuing their brethren?”

Upon reading this verse one might inadvertently do a kind of ‘double take’ and ask, “Is Abner blame shifting?” Even though he had a reconstituted force behind him, the tide of the battle was evident – Abner was getting routed! His reasonable plea for peace, then, seems a little disingenuous. After all, the man asking, “**Shall the sword devour forever?**” is the same man who initially ‘raised his sword’ to instigate this civil war. The same man who said, “**Do you not know that it will be bitter in the latter end?**” is the same who started that which he said would be bitter in the end. The same man who said, “**how long will it be then until you tell the people to return from pursuing their brethren?**” is the same man who lead brethren to pursue other brethren after he had divided brethren. Abner, then, appears to be engaging in some measure of disingenuous blame-shifting.

Don't get me wrong, if Abner was genuinely interested in peace, as in a peace treaty, the option would have been a worthwhile option. If he was willing to lay down the sword a treaty would have been appropriate; but, as subsequent revelation will show, such was not Abner's intention. He would continue to carry the sword in vain...

In verse twenty-seven we see Joab's response...

Verse 27

²⁷ And Joab said, "As God lives, unless you had spoken, surely then by morning all the people would have given up pursuing their brethren."

Many commentators suggest that this verse should be understood as Joab saying something like this to Abner, 'If you hadn't spoken this morning and started this thing, the people who people wouldn't have pursued their brethren.' However, the predominant translations of this text all suggest the way it is written above with the idea being – Joab is saying, 'If you didn't raise the white flag me and my men would have pursued you and your men until the morning.' Nonetheless, what is clear is that Job desisted and I think he made the right call. In so much as he could, he practiced forbearance at this point. Furthermore, he was prudent. If Abner made such a plea how would the rest of Israel feel if suddenly David's side looked as though they were mercilessly slaughtering their brethren?

Verses 28

²⁸ So Joab blew a trumpet; and all the people stood still and did not pursue Israel anymore, nor did they fight anymore.

This spoke of the present campaign. In the opening verse of chapter three we are told that the war went on for a long time (3:1).

Verse 29

²⁹ Then Abner and his men went on all that night through the plain, crossed over the Jordan, and went through all Bithron; and they came to Mahanaim.

They made the overnight journey, resettled themselves at Mahanaim, an area presumably out of easy reach for both David's forces and Philistine forces. *Interestingly, there is a sense of symmetry in these closing verses once again:* both armies traveled through the night and both armies had about a twenty-six mile journey.

Verses 30 through 32

³⁰ So Joab returned from pursuing Abner. And when he had gathered all the people together, there were missing of David's servants nineteen men and Asahel. ³¹ But the servants of David had struck down, of Benjamin and Abner's men, three hundred and sixty men who died. ³² Then they took up Asahel and buried him in his father's tomb, which was in Bethlehem. And Joab and his men went all night, and they came to Hebron at daybreak.

Whereas most soldiers were probably buried on the spot, because of Asahel's relationship to David, he was brought to Bethlehem and buried in his father's tomb. This is the only reference we see to Zeruiah's husband (vs.32a).

A Sneak Peek and a Closing Consideration

As we conclude our consideration of this chapter, I think we ought to close by taking a peek at the opening verse of chapter three:

Now there was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. But David grew stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker. (3:1)

Abner's defeat in chapter two, and the summary statement of chapter three, well illustrate the reality: it is futile to fight against the kingdom of God. Those who do may bruise heels, but they received crushed heads. Ironically, particularly in much of 2nd Samuel, those who fight against the kingdom of God confirm the kingdom's coming by their own destruction. Likewise, to resist the reign of Christ and to place one's self on the throne is to embrace futility and a pathway that leads to the most bitter end imaginable. Just as Abner's battle was a losing battle through and through, so it is a losing battle to wage war against the precepts of the Gospel of Christ. Furthermore, why take up a sword, either literally or metaphorically, against a King who took up a cross so that self-driven Abner-like sinners could receive a kingdom they could never earn or deserve? To do so is not only a demonstration of futility, but lunacy.