

Introduction

I stand before you sore but relieved. I have mentioned to several of you that I was digging a trench this week. I needed to dig up and replace the drainage pipe for my sump pump. It is 71 feet from the outlet to the street! One of the most important aspects of replacing the pipe was to make sure that the pipe was laid at a consistent downward slope so any water expelled from the sump pump would drain efficiently all the way down to the outlet. This was the challenge. As soon as I would get one segment sloped correctly, I would run into another that was wrong. I did a lot of digging all week long. It was tiring and frustrating and there were times I wished I could just blink my eye and it would be done. But in those moments I just reminded myself that there is nothing wrong with slow and steady. Take it one segment at a time. Get it right and move on to the next one. Finally yesterday I laid the new pipe in the trench and tested it. And yes! Water flowed from the house through the pipe all the way to the street! So I am sore, but I am relieved. David's ascension to the throne of Israel was kinda like my trench. It did NOT happen all at once. Things went seemingly slowly but steady. It was tough and there was war. But God was working and David was getting stronger. Lets read this morning a portion of the full text from which I will be preaching—2 Samuel 3:1-11.

[Read 2 Samuel 3:1-11 and Pray]

Because of Saul's failure to keep the command of God, the LORD sent Samuel to anoint another man to be king over Israel. David was the man of God's choosing. He was a man after God's own heart. David himself did not aspire to the throne, nor did he seek to take it for himself. David had regard for the fact that Saul was the Lord's anointed and would not put out his own hand against him selfishly and in his own power to take the throne by his own effort. Now Saul is dead. The people of Judah have recognized God's choice of David to be king over Israel and submitted themselves to him. The remainder of the territories of Israel, however, have not come to that recognition. Opposition to David is led by Abner, the former commander of Saul's armies. Abner took it upon himself to crown Saul's son Ish-bosheth and proclaim him king over all Israel.

The issue before us then is how is it that David will come to reign over the whole kingdom. We are covering a lot of territory in the scripture this morning, but a single overriding point emerges amongst a number of others. God is bringing David to the throne of all of Israel. He is doing it His way, by His power, and in His time. And over all, we learn that when you are against the LORD, he may allow you to do your thing for a while but your end will be tragic if you do not repent. We also learn that when you are for the Lord, he will accomplish his purposes for you, but it may well be in a fashion that is slow and steady, and you will need to trust and obey.

I want to first summarize the material that we have before us in 2 Samuel 2-3. First, in chapter 2:8-11, Abner makes Ish-bosheth king in Mahanaim. It is a location removed to more the outskirts of the land. Mahanaim means "two camps." It is where Jacob divided his entourage into two camps when he was returning home to meet Esau. In effect Abner has defied the Lord's anointing of David and made Israel into two camps. Ish-bosheth's reign there was comparatively short before meeting his demise. Meanwhile David's reign in Hebron over Judah was comparatively long before his exaltation to the throne of all Israel.

Now, in 2:12-17, Abner brings his men south from Mahanaim down to the threshold of Judah as though to provoke a war. He comes to the pool of Gibeon and meets David's men there. Abner proposes a competition between twelve representatives from each side. Joab, the commander of David's armies, agrees. The result was twenty-four dead men. They all killed each other. But it started a battle in which David's men put the servants of Ish-bosheth on the run.

An important event took place in the midst of the flight of Israel. Verses 18-23 alert us of three brothers, Joab, Abishai, and Asahel. Asahel was fleet of foot. He could run like a gazelle. He caught up to Abner who was a superior warrior. Abner warned Asahel to turn and go after somebody else. But Asahel was overconfident because of his speed. He would not let up, and Abner made him pay. The details are graphic. The combination of Asahel's speed and the thrust of Abner's spear resulted in the spear entering Asahel's stomach and exiting his back. It was shocking.

Abner then proposes a truce. He is clearly an outspoken man who is self-confident. Joab for some reason has mercy on Abner and the beleaguered army of Israel and calls off the pursuit. Both armies go back home. The casualties for the servants of David even with the death of Asahel were merely 20 while the servants of Ish-bosheth saw 360 die that day.

The theme of chapters 2 and 3 is summarized in chapter 3 verse 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." How did David's house grow stronger and stronger? Surely by the winning of battles, but also by expanding. David was busy fathering sons and building a dynasty. He married a daughter of a foreign king thus expanding his political connections in the region. The weakening of the house of Saul was evident in the maneuvering of Abner to become more and more dominant. Nothing is heard of Ish-bosheth fathering children. But he was suspicious that Abner had committed an act which would be tantamount to declaring himself king. Abner argued that Ish-bosheth had a strange way of thanking him for all the loyalty he had shown to the house of Saul. It seems to me that Abner believes that all he has done for Ish-bosheth and the house of Saul affords him the privilege of doing what he wants with Saul's concubine. But, it is also possible that Abner is insulted that Ish-bosheth would even think for a moment he would do such a thing, given how loyal he had been to the house of Saul. At any rate, Abner was now done with Ish-bosheth. He was moving on to join with David. Abner demonstrates that all along he was aware that the Lord had assured David he would reign over all of Israel.

He sends messengers to David to negotiate a transfer. David stipulates he must have Michal returned to him. Ish-bosheth agrees. David meets with Abner and makes a covenant and Abner departs in peace. Meanwhile Joab returns from a raid and learns of David's mercy toward Abner. Joab appears concerned for David, and likely he was, but he also was probably concerned for his job as commander. Along with the participation of his brother Abishai and in opposition to the provisions of David, Joab murders Abner in retribution for Abner's killing of Asahel.

David curses Joab and displays his disdain for his treachery. He commands Joab and all the people to mourn for Abner. They honor Abner by burying him at Hebron. David is truly distraught. He declares that he has displayed gentleness. He calls on the Lord to repay the evildoer according to his wickedness. David refuses to excuse wrongdoing.

What I intend to do this morning is to look at some of the minor lessons embedded into the overall major lesson of the text, and then I want to come back at the end to the main point. And the way I want to do it is by focusing on specific lessons we learn from the major characters in the narrative.

Let's start with . . .

I. Abner.

Abner is quite the self-confident guy. You would have to be to rise to the place of commander over a king's army. However, Abner's confidence in himself is stunning. It is highlighted in a number of ways in the text. First, you have HIM MAKING Ish-bosheth king over Israel. The text says (2:8), "Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and brought him to Mahanaim, and he made him king . . .to reign over Israel." This man sees himself as the one who is in charge. You have run into people like him. They emerge from a crowd as the ones who speak the loudest and assert their position the strongest. They will take over if they are allowed to do so. And that is what Abner did. As you move through the text, you begin to notice that it is always Abner who is taking the initiative. The confrontation at the pool of Gibeon began with the fact that Abner (v. 12) went out from Manahaim to Gibeon. If you look on a map you will see that this was a move from the capital to the threshold of Judah. Joab and the servants of the house of David went to Gibeon in response. Then it was Abner who suggested that "the young men arise and compete." It was later Abner who called for the truce.

It was then Abner who made himself strong in the house of Saul (3:6). He was taking control. He spoke strongly to Ish-bosheth when confronted. "Am I a dog's head of Judah?" This was to assert that Ishbosheth was treating him in a most insulting way given all that HE had done for the house of Saul. Abner sees himself as the difference-maker. HE could have given everything over to the hand of David. It is all under his control! And now turning it all over to David is what HE is going to do. Consider how strong is Abner's sense of his own ability in these words. He says in chapter 3:9-10, "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 Judah, from Dan to Beersheba." Dan was a town in the very northern territory and Beersheba was a town in the very south of Israel.

Looking through Abner's point of view, HE is the only reason David was not already reigning over all of Israel. And now HE is going to help God along. In retaliation toward Ish-bosheth, Abner was going to be the one who makes it happen that David's rule would be from north to south. Look now at verse 12 of chapter 3. Here is Abner again, asserting that power belongs to HIM. Abner sent messengers to David . . . 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." In other words, "The land is in my hand. I hold the power here. You make covenant with me and I will make it happen."

Abner was a powerful man, as powerful men go, but he was not a godly man. Although it was a despicable act by Joab, it was in the providence of God that this self-confident man was removed out of the picture before he could join the company of David and think that he was the one who brought about the unification of Israel under David.

It will not be the power of a man who places David on the throne of the land. It will be by the power of God. And this man Abner had resisted God from the first. He resisted not because he did not know what God had promised but because he did not want what God had promised. His office was one of significant power and influence. He wanted to hold on to that power and influence. He resisted the promise of God in an effort to make it happen. And he led the forces of the house of Saul against those of David as part of that effort. He failed. His fight against the house of David was unsuccessful.

We live in a world that behaves like Abner. It knows the truth. Every day it stares the proof of God in the face through creation, but declares that there is no God. It refuses to embrace the truth. And increasingly it assaults those who bear the truth. But it can't change the truth. Sometimes our own hearts are tempted to do likewise. Do you know the truth but dislike it so much that you determine to spite that truth? Take a lesson from Abner. Refuse to follow in his steps. Repent and believe the truth. Embrace the truth. The truth will set you free.

But not only did Abner assault the truth. There came a time when he spoke the truth. It was not because he liked it, however. He spoke it because it was expedient for him to do so. He admitted that God had promised David to rule Israel. And now he was going to use that word for his own benefit. Commentator Dale Ralph Davis summarizes it well: "If Ishbosheth was not going to roll over and play dead, then the next best option was to swing his support over to David and use his influence over the northern tribes as a bargaining chip with David, thereby assuring himself of a powerful spot in David's regime. Abner only quotes Scripture when it supports a pro-Abner move." All that mattered to Abner was keeping his power. He is like the young man who saved the life of a boy who fell through the ice. Praise was being heaped upon him. He was being called a hero. And someone asked him how he was brave enough to risk his life. He replied, "I had no choice—he was wearing my ice skates."

For Abner it wasn't about the truth. It was about the power. It was about the prestige. It was about, well, Abner. And it is easy for us to agree Abner was despicable. But let's not be so fast.

In the book of Acts, Simon Magus believed and was baptized because he wanted to be popular. And at times the same spirit ran through the disciples. Jesus explains to them that he is going to have to die, but they won't talk about that. Instead, they begin to argue over which of them is the greatest. Following Christ is not about competition. It is not about self-seeking but self-sacrifice. The bottom line is this: do we desire to get from people what WE want or do we desire to please the Lord Jesus Christ. Rightly does Paul tell the Colossians, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward" (Colossians 3:23-24).

David mourned and honored Abner for his human greatness. But he is not a godly model to be followed.

Let's turn next to . . .

II. Asahel

Asahel is on the right side. He is on the side of David. He is one of David's premier servants. Everybody knows that he is speedy. He runs like a gazelle. But he had more of the gift of speed than of wisdom. Perhaps he was driven by pride, wanting to overtake the top gun on the enemy's side. To be fair, he was warned by Abner. Abner knew this would come between him and Joab, but he had no choice; it was kill or be killed. And Abner, well, killed Asahel.

Asahel was fast. He was also fearless. But sadly, Asahel was foolish. Paul warns us all of a critical danger: "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:12). Asahel is a reminder that we must not allow our giftedness go to our heads.

We can learn a thing or two as well from . . .

III. Ishbosheth

He was a pawn. He was king, but it was not by God's anointing. It was by the doing of Abner. He was a puppet. It is little surprise that when he dared question Abner, when he dared express authority over him, Abner left him. Ishbosheth was a partner in the crime of defying God with a person who made him everything he was. Abner took Ishbosheth and made him king. And Ishbosheth let him. It is no wonder that the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker. His rule was doomed from the start because it was opposed to God. How much better for Ishbosheth if he would just have abdicated and surrendered the throne to David himself.

Ishbosheth's listening to Abner is like our listening to the devil. He whispers through the flesh that we are something that we are not. Whatever he makes of us we are just his pawn. We are being used for his power and purposes. And if we buck him he will just abandon us. He is not really there to help us only to use us. He has no power to make us what we are not. It is only an illusion which becomes more and more apparent. Beware of Satan. Don't believe his lies. He prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour.

Let's turn next to . . .

IV. Joab

Joab teaches us of the impact of bitterness. He and Abishai retaliated against Abner because he had killed their brother. But the circumstances make their act truly treacherous. Abner killed Asahel, yes, but it was in the midst of battle. It was also self-defense. Asahel was charging Abner. Abner warned Asahel. What else was he to do? On the other hand, when Joab killed Abner, Abner was under a grant of safe passage from David. He departed "in peace." In addition, Hebron was one of the cities of refuge wherein a person could find refuge from those looking to avenge a killing. Now Joab appears to have been concerned at least in part about deceit on Abner's part. But the explanation for Joab's murder of Abner was revenge.

Joab's action was denounced by David, and rightly so. Just because you think someone has sinister motives does not give you the right to murder them. Furthermore, Joab and Abishai should have been mindful that Abner's killing of Asahel was self-defense in the midst of battle. Their murder of Abner was flat wrong. And there is no excuse. But this is one of the fruits of bitterness, of holding on to anger. Remember not to let your emotions hide you from the facts. And even when those facts say that wrong has been done, remember "Vengeance is mine says the Lord. I will repay."

And that brings us at last to what we can learn from . . .

V. David

While the house of Saul becomes weaker and weaker, the house of David grows stronger and stronger. Ironically, however, David is the only one in this narrative who is not taking matters into his own hands. He is simply resting in the promise of God and doing what he can where he is. He is not passive. But he is not using the power and ingenuity of man to accomplish the purpose of God. You see he did not call himself to be king, and he will not make himself king. God called him. The LORD anointed him. He is in Hebron not because of selfish ambition but because of divine direction. And the LORD who has anointed him will bring about his will in his time. And so he grew stronger and stronger. What can he do? He can father children. He can form alliances. He can exhibit mercy as he did toward Abner. And he can stand for righteousness as he did with Joab. He can court the favor of the people of Israel by demonstrating that all of this self-seeking behavior is not from him. He is gentle not vengeful. But he hates unrighteousness. He is just. He can be trusted. He is winning hearts and earning respect rather than coercing allegiance from Israel. He can be content with God's time table. Seven and a half years is not too long a time to wait for God to do what he has promised. And it does not matter that his enemies fight and his own servants

misbehave. He will address those matters appropriately, but slow and steady is okay with him because it is not about him but about his God.

Think with me now about how David in this way points us to his greater descendent. David himself wrote Psalm 110. In verse 1 he wrote this: "The LORD says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." Even for Christ (David's Lord) the work of conquering is a work to be brought to pass by THE LORD. There is a sense in which the LORD is bringing about the submission to David's Lord and ours. In verse 3 he says, "Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power."

Listen. Hebrews 1:13 quotes this first verse of Psalm 110 and ascribes it to God the Father as spoken to his Son Jesus. Then in Hebrews 10, the writer says, "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet."

Now Christ is at the right hand of the Father. And HE waits. A day of consummation is coming when all his enemies will be under his feet. Jesus Christ is not alarmed about the fact that there is not a straight and immediate line from cross to resurrection to return. He is ruling and reigning until all his chosen people shall come willingly to submit gladly to him. And he will then bring a rod of iron to bear upon all his enemies. It is not because of any Abner in this world who thinks he is a maker of kings. It is by the work of God for the glory of God and will humiliate the pride of man.

A lot is going on in this world. But the kingdoms of this world are growing weaker and weaker and the kingdom of Christ is becoming stronger and stronger. The war may last long but his victory and reign is forever. So keep holding on and keep the faith. If Christ is seated at the right hand of God, then let those whose Lord he is be seated in peace in him.

Conclusion

As Davis writes, "Yahweh's people must remember these earlier kingdom episodes, for sometimes nothing looks so unlikely and remote to us as the day when the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Revelation 11:15). But come it will, for God has decreed it to Jesus (Psalm 2:8-9), and no Abner or Joab or greater conspirator will be able to stop it" (Davis, 48).