

2 Samuel 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Samuel chapter 2 3 Samuel chapter 2 But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim.

And he made him king over Gilead and the Asherites and Jezreel and Ephraim and Benjamin and all Israel. Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned two years.

But the house of Judah followed David. And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months. Abner the son of Ner and the servants of Ish-bosheth the son of Saul went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon.

And Joab the son of Zehariah and the servants of David went out and met them at the pool of Gibeon. And they sat down, the one on the one side of the pool and the other on the other side of the pool. And Abner said to Joab, Let the young men arise and compete before us.

And Joab said, Let them arise. Then they arose and passed over by number, twelve for Benjamin and Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and twelve of the servants of David. And each caught his opponent by the head and thrust his sword in his opponent's side, so they fell down together.

[2 : 0 7] Therefore that place was called Helcath-Hazurim, which is at Gibeon. And the battle was very fierce that day, and Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David. And the three sons of Zehariah were there, Joab, Abishai, and Asahel.

Now Asahel was as swift of foot as a wild gazelle. And Asahel pursued Abner, and as he went he turned neither to the right hand nor to the left from following Abner. Then Abner looked behind him and said, Is it you Asahel?

And he answered, It is I. Abner said to him, Turn aside to your right hand or to your left, and seize one of the young men and take his spoil. But Asahel would not turn aside from following him.

And Abner said again to Asahel, Turn aside from following me. Why should I strike you to the ground? How then could I lift up my face to your brother Joab? But he refused to turn aside.

Therefore Abner struck him in the stomach, with the butt of his spear, so that the spear came out at his back. And he fell there and died where he was. And all who came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died stood still.

[3 : 1 1] But Joab and Abishai pursued Abner. And as the sun was going down they came to the hill of Amr, which lies before Gibeon on the way to the wilderness of Gibeon. And the people of Benjamin gathered themselves together behind Abner and became one group and took their stand on the top of a hill.

Then Abner called to Joab, Shall the sword devour forever? Do you not know that the end will be bitter? How long will it be before you tell your people to turn from the pursuit of their brothers?

And Joab said, As God lives, if you had not spoken, surely the men would not have given up the pursuit of their brothers until the morning. So Joab blew the trumpet and all the men stopped and pursued Israel no more, nor did they fight any more.

And Abner and his men went all that night through the Arabah. They crossed the Jordan and marching the whole morning they came to Mahanaim. Joab returned from the pursuit of Abner. And when he had gathered all the people together, there were missing from David's servants 19 men besides Asahel.

But the servants of David had struck down of Benjamin 360 of Abner's men. And they took up Asahel and buried him in the tomb of his father, which was at Bethlehem.

[4 : 18] And Joab and his men marched all night, and the day broke upon them at Hebron. In 2 Samuel chapter 2, David finally becomes king, if at first only the king of Judah.

The land is divided between Judah, over which David rules, and Gilead and the rest of Israel, over which Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul, rules. Once again, the nation has fractured along familiar fault lines, anticipating the later division of the nation following the death of Solomon.

David inquires of the Lord concerning what he should do. This contrast was Saul's failure to ask the Lord what he ought to do. The verb go up is important here. David is ascending back into the land.

He is ascending to Hebron, and then he is going to ascend to the throne. David and his men move into the territory of Hebron. Besides being a city of refuge and a sacred city, Hebron was an important site for Abraham and the patriarchs.

It was near the first parcel of land possessed in the Promised Land, as Abraham bought the cave and the field of Machpelah as a burial site. Later, Hebron was the territory given to and conquered by Caleb in Joshua chapter 14.

[5 : 24] It was a region possessed by giants, the giants that had initially discouraged Israel from entering the land, but which Caleb faced with great courage. Caleb was the representative of Judah among the tribes in the spying out of the land.

He was a principal Judahite. It seems fitting that David would be associated with Caleb in the sight of his first possession in the land. David is a Caleb-like character.

He follows in the footsteps of the courageous and faithful warrior of Judah. Like Caleb, he was a giant killer, and someone exhibiting the same bravery on the basis of God's promise.

He has also married the widow of Nabal the Calebite. Peter Lighthouse observes that David is established as king in three distinct stages. First, he is anointed as king-designate by Samuel in 1 Samuel chapter 16.

He is set apart as a leading warrior at this time through his defeat of Goliath. Second, he is anointed as king or chief of the house of Judah in this chapter. And finally, he becomes high king of Israel in chapter 5.

[6 : 26] Lighthouse compares this to the way in which Christ is exalted by stages. He is anointed by the Spirit in his baptism. He is declared to be the Son of God in power in his resurrection. And he is raised to the right hand of the Father in his ascension.

Reading the story of David, we should see many ways in which he prefigures Christ. For instance, as one who gains power chiefly through love, David anticipates Christ, who does not just command the external obedience of his people, but reigns in their hearts by his Spirit, fulfilling his law in them by love.

David once again shows magnanimity in his treatment of those loyal to Saul. He does not seek to destroy or eye with suspicion the supporters of Saul, such as the men of Jabesh Gilead.

He recognises and praises the steadfast love and faithfulness that they showed to Saul, and declares that he will do good to them on account of their loyalty. He presents himself not as an opponent to Saul, desiring to wipe out Saul's supporters and dynasty, but as a fitting and generous successor, who admires and rewards the virtues of loyal Israelites.

Even when those loyalties would not naturally move towards him. Abner, the commander of Saul's army, sets up Ish-bosheth as king. The suggestion might be that Abner was the true power behind the throne, and as we read on in the story, that seems to have been the case.

[7 : 45] The establishment of Ish-bosheth as king occurs when Ish-bosheth was 40 years old, and he reigns over Israel for two years. However, David is king over Judah in Hebron for seven years and six months.

How do we reconcile these details? It seems most likely to me that after the loss at the Battle of Gilboa, much of Israel's territory was under Philistine domination again.

Ish-bosheth's kingdom was a rump kingdom, established in Mahanaim, in the region of the Transjordan. Outside of Judah, the promised land itself was not securely controlled by Israel at this time.

It was not unlikely that it took about five years to establish this rump kingdom to start to re-establish some of what had been lost. This should also give some sense of the bad condition that Israel was in at this point in its history.

Abner and Joab, the respective commanders of the armies of the two kingdoms, both meet at Gibeon. It's an important city of the Gibeonites in the tribal land of Benjamin, presumably within the region of Ish-bosheth's kingdom.

[8 : 45] We aren't told how conflict between the two kingdoms emerged. Perhaps Abner was seeking to establish Ish-bosheth's kingdom in the city of Gibeon, which was described as a great city like one of the royal cities back in Joshua chapter 10.

It is about five miles northwest of Jerusalem. Another possibility is that David was making overtures to the Gibeonites. Perhaps he was seeking to persuade them to leave Saul and join him.

As we see later on in the book, in chapter 21, Saul had killed many of the Gibeonites, who should have been protected. So they would be a weak point in the kingdom of Ish-bosheth.

Another possibility for David's going out that some have suggested is that David was a vassal of the Philistines at this point, and that that might have been one of his responsibilities, to ensure that no other power got established in the surrounding region.

Joab and Abner set up ritual combat, a contest in which a number of chosen warriors were to fight in representative combat. There were twelve on each side. Perhaps the intention was that the Lord would determine the side that would represent all Israel.

[9 : 48] It isn't entirely clear what happened, whether there was treachery or breaking of the rules involved, or anything of that kind. However, the contest proved indecisive, and the two armies ended up fighting directly, with Abner's forces being beaten by David's men.

This symbolic or representative conflict did not give an auspicious sign. All of the parties died. The three sons of Zeruiah, Joab, Abishai and Asahel, are involved in the fighting.

Abishai was already introduced to us back in 1 Samuel chapter 26, as Joab's brother, and the one who accompanied David and his daring escapade in Saul's camp. Here Joab and Asahel are first presented to us in person in the narrative.

Joab will be one of the most important characters in the entire book of 2 Samuel. These are the sons of David's sister, Zeruiah, as we discover in 1 Chronicles chapter 2.

Asahel stubbornly pursues Abner, even when Abner tries to discourage him. It seems that Abner knew that Asahel would overtake him if he continued, but also that Asahel wouldn't stand much of a chance in fighting him.

[10 : 53] Abner's concern seems to be that he knows Joab is a vicious and vengeful man. If he kills Asahel, the hope of de-escalation of the conflict would be considerably diminished. What might merely have been a relatively minor skirmish could blow up into something a very great deal bigger.

If this became personal for Joab, all of the people could suffer as a result. Asahel does not end his pursuit though, and he is slain by Abner with the presumably sharpened butt end of his spear.

Abner is still pursued by Asahel's two brothers, Joab and Abishai. Abner's men, people of Benjamin, gather around him and he addresses Joab from the top of a hill.

Abner wants to ensure that things don't escalate further, and he calls Joab and Abishai to give up their pursuit. The ritual combat had completely devoured twelve sets of brothers by the sword, a very bad sign of what full-blown war would entail for Israel.

Abner seeks to prevent this, and manages to persuade Joab to stand down, both returned to where they had come from. A question to consider.

[12 : 01] Abner is presented to us as a man alert to the ways that levels of conflict can be increased through the dynamics of vengeance, and attentive to the ways in which even armed conflict can be de-escalated or controlled.

This is an example of what peacemaking can actually look like in practice. What are some other tactics by which conflicts can be more effectively contained or de-escalated when they occur?

What are some ways that we can deploy these tactics in our lives and relationships?