

2 Samuel 19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] 2 Samuel chapter 19. It was told Joab, Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom. So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people, for the people heard that day, the king is grieving for his son. And the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle. The king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son. Then Joab came into the house to the king and said, You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who have this day saved your life and the lives of your sons and your daughters, and the lives of your wives and your concubines, because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you. For you have made it clear today that your commanders and servants are nothing to you. For today I know that if Absalom were alive, and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants, for I swear by the Lord, if you do not go, not a man will stand with you this night, and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now. Then the king arose and took his seat in the gate, and the people were all told, Behold the king is sitting in the gate, and all the people came before the king. Now Israel had fled every man to his own home, and all the people were arguing throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, The king delivered us from the hand of our enemies, and saved us from the hand of the Philistines, and now he has fled out of the land from Absalom.

But Absalom, whom we anointed over us, is dead in battle. Now therefore why do you say nothing about bringing the king back? And king David sent this message to Zadok and Abiathar the priests, Say to the elders of Judah, Why should you be the last to bring the king back to his house, when the word of all Israel has come to the king? You are my brothers, you are my bone and my flesh, why then should you be the last to bring back the king? And say to Amasa, Are you not my bone and my flesh? God do so to me and more also, if you are not commander of my army from now on in the place of Joab. And he swayed the heart of all the men of Judah as one man, so that they sent word to the king, Return both you and all your servants. So the king came back to the Jordan, and Judah came to Gilgal to meet the king, and to bring the king over the Jordan. And Shimei the son of Gerah the Benjaminite from Behorim, hurried to come down with the men of Judah to meet king David. And with him were a thousand men from Benjamin. And Zeba the servant of the house of Saul, with his fifteen sons and his twenty servants, rushed down to the Jordan before the king, and they crossed the ford to bring over the king's household and to do his pleasure. And Shimei the son of Gerah fell down before the king, as he was about to cross the Jordan, and said to the king, Let not my lord hold me guilty, or remember how your servant did wrong on the day my lord the king left Jerusalem. Do not let the king take it to heart, for your servant knows that I have sinned. Therefore behold, I have come this day, the first of all the house of Joseph, to come down to meet my lord the king. Abishai the son of

Zerariah answered, Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the lord's anointed? But David said, What have I to do with you, you sons of Zerariah, that you should this day be as an adversary to me? Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day? For do I not know that I am this day king over Israel? And the king said to Shimei, You shall not die. And the king gave him his oath. And Mephibosheth the son of Saul came down to meet the king. He had neither taken care of his feet, nor trimmed his beard, nor washed his clothes, from the day the king departed until the day he came back in safety. And when he came to Jerusalem to meet the king, the king said to him, Why did you not go with me, Mephibosheth? He answered, My lord, O king, my servant deceived me. For your servant said to him, I will saddle a donkey for myself, that I may ride on it and go with the king, for your servant is lame. He has slandered your servant to my lord the king. But my lord the king is like the angel of God. Do therefore what seems good to you. For all my father's house were but men doomed to death before my lord the king. But you set your servant among those who eat at your table. What further right have I then to cry to the king? And the king said to him, Why speak any more of your affairs?

I have decided, you and Zeba shall divide the land. And Mephibosheth said to the king, Oh, let him take it all, since my lord the king has come safely home. Now Barzillai the Gileadite had come down from Rogalim, and he went on with the king to the Jordan to escort him over the Jordan. Barzillai was a very aged man, eighty years old. He had provided the king with food while he stayed at Mahanaim, for he was a very wealthy man. And the king said to Barzillai, Come over with me, and I will provide for you with me in Jerusalem. But Barzillai said to the king, How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? I am this day eighty years old. Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? Your servant will go a little way over the Jordan with the king.

Why should the king repay me with such a reward? Please let your servant return, that I may die in my own city near the grave of my father and my mother. But here is your servant, Chimham. Let him go over with my lord the king, and do for him whatever seems good to you. And the king answered, Chimham shall go over with me, and I will do for him whatever seems good to you. And all that you desire of me I will do for you. Then all the people went over the Jordan, and the king went over, and the king kissed Barzillai and blessed him, and he returned to his own home. The king went on to Gilgal, and Chimham went on with him. All the people of Judah, and also half the people of Israel, brought the king on his way. Then all the men of Israel came to the king, and said to the king, Why have our brothers the men of Judah stolen your way, and brought the king and his household over the Jordan, and all David's men with him? All the men of Judah answered the men of Israel, Because the king is our close relative. Why then are you angry over this matter? Have we eaten at all at the king's expense? Or has he given us any gift? And the men of Israel answered the men of

[6 : 15] Judah, We have ten shares in the king, and in David also we have more than you. Why then did you despise us? Were we not the first to speak of bringing back our king? But the words of the men of Judah were fiercer than the words of the men of Israel. David's response to the news from the battle is unseemly. Israel has just won a spectacular victory. David's loyal men have fought and put their lives on the line for him, yet they had to slink back in as if they were a defeated force, as the king was in mourning for his rebellious son who was killed, the very man who had staged the coup, and sought to dethrone him. Joab has to take emergency action. At this point it seems that Joab is really the power in Israel. David has been passive, and largely unable to act effectively as king since his sin with Bathsheba. As David has declined, Joab has filled much of the power vacuum.

David is seemingly unmindful of the danger that his weakness and indecision has placed the kingdom in, but Joab is very concerned on this front. His plan to bring back Absalom to the land was designed in part to make clear the line of succession, which had been left dangerously uncertain after Absalom killed the crown prince Amnon and became the next in line to the throne. However, Absalom proved more volatile than Joab had bargained for, and his brinksmanship and rebellion had brought Israel down into a bloody civil war. Joab had learned his lesson the first time, and so he killed Absalom, rather than sparing him as the king required, and leaving a door of possibility open to a further coup in the future. Joab at this point almost certainly thinks that David no longer has the capacity to rule. He wants to tighten his grip upon David, and the destiny of the kingdom more generally. David will try to take Joab down a peg here, but he will prove unsuccessful. Joab rebukes David, speaking to him less as his king than as a child to be told off. He accuses him of shameful behaviour. Joab warns him that the situation is one of the greatest urgency and seriousness.

If David does not act immediately, the victory will curdle into a terrible disaster for him, far more devastating than anything that he has faced to this point in his life. We might well hear a veiled threat here. If David doesn't shape up, Joab will be only too prepared to take over the reins. David responds as he ought to do. He returns to his seat of judgement by the gate, and all of the people come to him. David now faces the challenge of reuniting the nation after bloody civil war, winning back the hearts of the people, treating both loyalists and former rebels with wisdom, and re-establishing his throne on a just and sure footing.

Peter Lighthouse notes the way that David's encounters on his return to Jerusalem mirror those of his departure. When he departed, he met with Hushai, Ziba, and Shimei, and now on his return he meets Shimei, Ziba, and Barzillai. Both Hushai and Barzillai are elderly loyalists of David, who would have been a burden had they accompanied him. David shows mercy towards Shimei, who had cursed him when he passed through Behorim on his way out of the land. Abishai, who had sought to kill Shimei on the previous encounter, seeks to do so again. Once again, however, David prevents him from doing so. David's response to Abishai here might make the attentive reader think of our Lord's response to Peter, when Peter seeks to discourage him from going to the cross, and then later on in the story when Peter strikes Malchus, the high priest's servant, with the sword. David's mercy towards former enemies and rebels would make the reunion of the nation easier than it would have been had he been concerned to enact reprisals. Clemency to the former supporters of Absalom enabled the nation to come together once again behind David. Ziba had come to meet David around the same time as Shimei, when he and his men were crossing the Jordan. He had earlier been blessed on account of his master's seeming treachery. However, shortly after Mephibosheth appears, and he has a very different story to tell. He has, he claims, been in mourning since David left Jerusalem, and his appearance supports his story. Ziba tricked him and slandered him to David in order to get an advantage over him.

He puts himself in David's hand. David determines to split the land between the two of them, and Mephibosheth's response is to say that the land does not matter to him. What matters is that David has returned. Ziba can have it all. Mephibosheth's concern is not with property and possessions, but with his relationship with the king. David's judgment here seems manifestly unjust on the face of it. However, looking at it more closely, we would not be mistaken to hear some resemblance between this and the story of Solomon and the two prostitutes with the child. Mephibosheth's answer is absolutely the right one. It reveals that he is the true loyalist of David, and strongly suggests that Ziba is a liar. We are not told what happens next, but it seems likely that Mephibosheth would have received all of his former property back.

[11 : 04] After Mephibosheth, David's interaction with Barzillai the Gileadite is recorded. Barzillai had given David's succor and support at the end of chapter 17 at Mahanaim, at a time of great need for David. David invites him to live with him in Jerusalem, where Barzillai would be provided for by David, in repayment for his immense loyalty. Barzillai, however, rejects David's offer due to his age and the difficulty that would be involved. He sends Chimham, presumably his son, in his stead, to be blessed and advanced in David's house on account of his father's great loyalty.

There are problems bubbling away in Israel throughout the chapter, though. David's challenge will be to bring the people of Israel back into union with the men of Judah. Absalom's coup had gained support in the northern tribes precisely because they had the impression that David gave very favourable treatment to his fellow Judahites. However, in returning David to the land, the privileged place given to Judah pours salt into that old wound, making the situation much worse.

David's honour guard for his re-entry into the land is mostly Judahites, with half the people of Israel with them. The impression might be received that David is really primarily the king of Judah, and that the other tribes simply aren't as important to him. David does give a gesture of conciliation in appointing Amasa, the commander of Absalom's men, as the new commander of his army in the place of Joab. David knows all too well by now the danger that Joab represents, presumably suspects that the hand of Joab was behind the death of Absalom, and he realises that he might soon face a coup from Joab if he is not careful. However, Amasa's appointment would prove short-lived. Joab had already killed Abner, who threatened to take his place at the beginning of the book, and now he will be quite prepared to take the life of Amasa too. The chapter ends with an argument between the Judahites and the rest of Israel. Israel insists that their title to David isn't being acknowledged properly by the Judahites. They have ten shares in David, while Judah has only one. Why should Judah be so privileged?

These continuing tensions show that the nation was far from united, and that it was ripe for further division and war. A question to consider. Disunity, distrust, and recurring eruptions of antagonisms along familiar fault lines was an enduring feature of Israel's life in the land from the time of their first entry into it. What were the causes or the reasons for some of the major divisions, and when were they most clearly seen in Israel's history? By what mechanisms could unity have been achieved, and what provisions did the Lord make for it? In what ways could the fractures in Israel be regarded as a natural consequence of the nation's sins?