

2 Samuel 3-4

'Promises, Politics, and Personal Agendas'

Civil War

For the last few years we have watched Iraq with a mixture of fascination and fear.

We have seen one regime closed down.

And we have seen power struggles emerge.

And in these last few weeks the American press has begun to talk very seriously about civil war.

And Americans know all too well about the evils of civil war.

After all, it was Abraham Lincoln who once summed up the American Civil War with these words:

'All dreaded it, all sought to avert it. And the war came.'

And history records that when it came, it was gruesome and cruel.

At the end of it more people were dead than have died in all other American wars put together.

Families and communities were divided.

Atrocities were committed.

And human dignity was debased.

Civil war is one of the more ugly forms of war.

It is a form of war that is inevitably sectarian, inevitably personal.

It draws out some of the worst in people.

This will be true if civil war erupts in Iraq.

It was true in the Spanish civil war.

It was true in the American civil war.

And it was true in the civil war that erupted in Israel after the death of King Saul.

The passage we are looking at today is a passage that occurs in the dying days of this civil war.

So, I wonder if you would turn with me in your Bibles to the book of 2 Samuel.

We are going to meet some fascinating people.

We are going to see them engage in intrigue and deception.

We will watch them being so very human.

And as we do, my hope is that God will teach and instruct us.

My hope is that as we see these people being so very human that God will be at work in us.

My hope is that his word here will be living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword.

So, with that in mind, I wonder if you would join with me in praying that God will use his word in this way with us today.

[Pray through Hebrews 4:12]

Lord God, we thank you that your word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword.

This morning we pray that as we examine it together that you will be at work.

Please use it to pierce our lives and to judge the thoughts and intentions of our hearts.

Please lay bare our lives and use your word to shape our existence.

Please help us to see ourselves rightly and to respond to you in faith and obedience.

We ask this in the name of your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Where are we?

Friends, the passages we are going to look at today and over the next few weeks are pretty obscure ones in the Old Testament.

They are not the usual stuff of sermons.

And they are not from a part of the Bible that we are familiar with.

And for this reason, I think I'd better put them into some sort of context for us.

So, let's just take a look at where we are in the Bible.

And to do this, let's start at the book of Genesis.

Genesis tells us that God created the world.

He created human beings.

But human beings rebelled against him.

But despite this, God had good things planned for humans.

And his means for bring about those good things was to choose one man and his descendants to be a blessing to the entire world.

In Genesis 12 we are told that God chooses Abraham and his descendants.

The rest of the book of Genesis is about Abraham and the next two or three generations.

By the beginning of the book of Exodus they have become quite numerous.

But they are not in the land God promised to Abraham.

Instead, they are in Egypt.

And so the book of Exodus explains how God rescues his people out of Egypt.

The books after Exodus explain how God brings his people into the promised land.

And after they settle in the promised land, they are ruled over by spirit anointed rulers called judges.

But the first book of Samuel tells us that they were not happy with these rulers.

They wanted to replace judges with a king.

And God granted them their request.

He promised them kings.

And he indicated that he would integrate kings into his relationship with his people.

Now, the first king was a man called Saul.

And at first, Saul looked like an ideal king.

But then he showed himself to be quite flawed.

And so God announced that he would take the kingship away from Saul.

He would give the kingship to a person of his choice.

And so God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint a new prospective king.

This new king did not look a very likely candidate.

He was the youngest son of a family with a mixed pedigree.

He was not a warrior but a shepherd boy.

And his name was David.

Now the rest of the book of 1 Samuel is about Saul's demise and David's rise.

At the end of the book of 1 Samuel, Saul is killed in battle.

And this sets the stage for a final struggle for the throne.

It sets the stage for civil war.

So, now that we've done a quick survey of the Bible up to this point, let's take a look at the main participants in our story.

Let's look at the main players.

Who are the main players?

Saul and Co.

- Abner

On the one side we have the remnants of Saul's family and his army.

In chapter 2 of 2 Samuel, we meet the commander in chief of Saul's army.

His name is Abner, the son of Ner.

He is Saul's uncle.

And he had watched over Saul and been his right hand military man from very early on in his kingship.

Abner knew Saul.

Abner knew David.

Abner knew that David had been promised the kingship by God.

- Ishbosheth

With this in mind, I want you to turn to 2 Samuel 2:8.

In 2 Samuel 2:8 we are told that after the death of Saul, Abner had taken Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, and made him king over a significant part of the nation.

Now we don't know much about Ishbosheth.

He has not been mentioned before in the story of Saul.

In fact, 2 Samuel 2:8 is the first time we hear about him in the Bible.

But there is the first side in the civil war.

We have an army commander – Abner – who take control after the death of Saul.

We have a puppet king – Ishbosheth.

And this king rules over the largest section of the nation of Israel.

David and Co.

- David

Now let's take a look at David and his company.

First, we have David himself.

David is an attractive man.

He is personable, passionate, and very gifted.

He has an ability to gather people around him.

But this is not his main strength.

His main strength is that he is God's appointed and anointed king.

He is the king God wants for all his people.

But at the moment, he is king of only a section of God's people.

You can see this in 2 Samuel 2:1-7.

There the men of one tribe, the tribe of Judah, anoint David as king over them.

He has his base at Hebron.

- Michal

Now in 2 Samuel 2:2 we find that David has two wives, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail, the widow of Nabal.

However, those who have been following the story know that David had another wife before these two.

His first wife was named Michal.

In 1 Samuel 18:20 we are told that she was in love with David.

And David won her hand by killing two hundred Philistines and bringing their foreskins to the king as a dowry.

In 1 Samuel 19, Michal had saved David's life when Saul had tried to kill him.

But 1 Samuel 25:44 tells us that in the conflict between Saul and David, Saul gave Michal to another man, a man called Paltiel.

- Joab

The third person that is important for our passage today is Joab.

Joab is one of a family of guys who are sometimes called 'the sons of Zeruiah'.

Now this in itself is a bit strange because the normal thing is to name sons after their father.

However, Zeruiah is not a man.

Zeruiah is a woman.

In fact, she is David's sister.

So, Joab, Abishai, and Asahel – the sons of Zeruiah – are David's cousins.

Now Joab and his brothers only appear toward the end of the book of 1 Samuel.

Nevertheless, they appear as men who are clearly committed to David.

What's more, they are men's men.

They are warriors.

They are cunning and sharp.

And Joab is chief among them.

He will appear time and time again in the book of 2 Samuel as a man committed to ensuring that David's kingship is safe and secure.

What's happened so far

So, there are the main participants.

Let me tell you what has happened so far in the story.

The forces of Ishbosheth and the forces of David have already engaged in chapter 2.

Abner and his forces went out one day to a place called Gibeon.

Joab and his men went out to meet them.

They decided that they would each appoint twelve of their best young men and engage in hand to hand combat.

The young men slaughtered each other and a full scale battle erupted.

And David's men emerged victorious.

Anyway, Abner took flight.

But as he did, Ashahel, Joab's brother took after him.

And Asahel was a good runner and kept up with Abner.

And at one point, Abner warned him to stop pursuing him.

But Asahel kept pushing on after Abner.

Abner warned him again.

But again Asahel kept coming.

And so Abner shoved the butt end of his spear into Asahel's stomach.

And Asahel fell and died on the spot.

This stopped most of the fighting.

But it didn't stop Asahel's brothers.

Joab and Abishai pressed on after Abner until Abner persuaded them to stop the foolishness.

At the end of the skirmish nineteen of David's men were dead.

But three hundred and sixty of Ishbosheth's men were dead.

Now with this we come to chapter 3.

And verse 1 tells us that the civil war between the house of Saul and the house of David lasted a long time.

And in that time the house of David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker.

What happens here?

Chapter 3

Now let's look at what happens chapters 3 and 4.

In 2 Samuel 3 we are told that Abner was strengthening his own position in the house of Saul.

And this doesn't go unnoticed.

Ishbosheth sees it.

Now we are not given any indication as to how Abner was strengthening his own position.

But Ishbosheth thinks that it is by sleeping with one of his concubines.

He accuses Abner.

And Abner reacts with anger and strength.

He promises that he has had enough of Ishbosheth and that he will hand over the kingdom to David.

Ishbosheth fails to reply or to deal with Abner out of fear.

And Abner proceeds to set about fulfilling his threat.

In verse 12 he sends messengers to David and seeks to make a covenant with him.

In verse 13 David agrees but adds a condition.

He wants Michal to be returned to him.

And so he sends messengers to Ishbosheth who caves in.

He takes Michal from her husband.

He is a husband who obviously has a deep love for Michal, because he follows her weeping all the way to Bahurim before being turned back by Abner.

Abner then goes about canvassing the various factions within Israel.

He goes to the important tribal leaders and works them over.

Finally he takes representatives to David and the deal is sealed with a covenant feast.

And verse 21 tells us that Abner goes away in peace.

In verse 22 we are told that Joab has been away while this political meeting has been going on.

Three times we are told that Abner had gone in peace.

But Joab is not happy with this.

He speaks roughly and bluntly with his king, basically accusing him of having acted foolishly.

And then, without David's knowledge, he deceives Abner and kills him.

As Abner had stabbed Asahel in the stomach, so Joab stabs Abner in the stomach in revenge.

In verse 28, David hears.

His first word is one of innocence from this blood feud.

He then utters a deep curse on Joab and his family.

And finally he orders Joab to mourn and to walk in front of a funeral procession in honour of Abner.

David himself walks behind the funeral bier.

And he composes a dirge that he sings in honour of Abner.

He fasts in Abner's honour.

And by all of these actions he makes sure that all Israel knows that he had no part in the murder of Abner.

Chapter 4

With this we move into chapter 4.

Now the story of chapter 4 is quite straightforward.

With Abner's death, Ishbosheth loses courage.

Two men from his own tribe decide to take advantage of the situation.

In an act of cowardice and treachery they murder him in his sleep.

Then they cut off his head and take it to David at Hebron.

Triumphantly they bring it to David.

But again David wishes to distance himself from their actions.

And so he pronounces the death penalty.

The two men are killed.

And Ishbosheth's head is burned in Abner's tomb in Hebron.

Chapter 5:1-5

The conclusion to our story comes in chapter 5, verses 1 to 5.

All the tribes of Israel come to David at Hebron.

They acknowledge that God is behind his rise.

A compact is engaged in.

And David is anointed king over all Israel.

Evaluating the main players

So, there is the story.

Now what I'd like to do is to quickly evaluate the main players in the story.

Abner

Let's take a look at Abner first.

I wonder if you noticed some things as we moved through the story.

Did you notice that Abner clearly knows that God wants David to be king?

Well, if he knew this, why had he taken Ishbosheth and made him king in chapter 2?

Surely it is because he is not fundamentally interested in God's position but his own.

Now in my view, you can see this in the way he seeks to strengthen his position in 2 Samuel 3:1.

You can also see it in his language in chapter 3.

I wonder if you noticed it?

Look at 2 Samuel 3:9.

Look at how Abner talks.

He talks as though he can deliver what God cannot.

Now look at verses 17 and 18.

Again, Abner talks about the Lord and what the Lord wanted.

And also talks about the fact that the elders of Israel had for some time wanted to make David king.

One can only assume that they have been stopped from doing this by Abner and his action.

You see, Abner is clearly concerned with his own position.

He uses potent theological language.

But he uses it in the service of his own ends.

He makes it sound so godly, but it is really so self centred.

It is really just part of his wanting to strengthen his own position.

Joab

Now let's turn to Joab.

Let me say that I have some sympathies for Joab.

You see, I think that he knows clearly that God's purposes are tied up with David.

He knows that David is God's anointed, God's messiah.

And I think that he really does have David's best interests in mind.

I think that he really does have the best interests of the kingdom in mind.

And I think that this will be demonstrated time and time again as the book of 2 Samuel progresses.

But Joab is also a man who has other agendas.

And those agendas are personal.

And those agendas will often work against the very kingdom he is so committed to.

You see, Joab here is a man committed to personal revenge.

He is a man who cannot be divorced from personal interest.

And that personal interest will cause him to act in such a way as to jeopardise the very kingdom that he has given his life supporting.

It will cause him to cut across the peace that his king wants to bring.

It will cause him to act deceitfully to a man under the protection of his king.

As David himself notes in verse 39, the acts of Joab and his brothers will weaken the very kingdom that they proclaim themselves guardians of.

David (and Michal)

Finally, let's turn to David.

Now I need to make sure we understand what is clear in this passage and throughout the books of Samuel.

David is the Lord's anointed.

He is the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

He is the pattern for Jesus.

But this passage and the passages that follow will show us beyond a shadow of doubt that he is far from Jesus Christ.

David may be the Lord's anointed.

But David is far from being an ideal king.

Let me just show you some hints of this within our passage.

First, let's think about Michal for a moment.

Michal is David's first wife.

She is a woman who clearly loved David.

She is a woman who protected David.

And yet in this passage that love and protection is not reciprocated.

Michal is a political pawn.

She is important because she is from Saul's family and related to David.

And so David must have her back for political reasons.

But David's disinterest in her is clear from the fact that she is not welcomed back by him.

He doesn't love her.

And he drags her away from someone who does love her.

And later, he will use her rebuke of him as an excuse to avoid having children by her.

She is a pawn in his political game.

Second, I want you to think about chapter 4 and chapter 3 and what happens there.

In chapter 4 there is a man who is innocent who is killed by bloodthirsty men interested in their own agendas.

How does David deal with these men?

He deals with justice.

He deals rightly.

He acts as judge and punishes their sin.

But what does he do in chapter 3?

In chapter 3 there is a man who is innocent and who is killed by bloodthirsty men interested in their own agendas.

But how does David deal with Joab?

He utters a curse.

He tells his men that the sons of Zeruiah have weakened him and are too strong for him.

And he fails to act with justice.

He may curse and humiliate Joab.

But he refuses to deal rightly with Joab.

He does not act as judge and punish this man for murder.

And in doing so, despite his claims of innocence, he allows bloodletting to be a part of his rule.

He refuses to stamp on it quickly and ruthlessly.

He knows how important Joab and ruthless men are.

He knows that they will be of political and military aid to him and his kingdom.

And so he slaps them on the wrist.

And for the rest of his life he will occasionally express frustration with these sons of Zeruiah.

But he will not deal with them until he is on his death bed and calls upon his successor to deal with them.

But even then, it will be in personal revenge, not for the sake of his kingdom.

Politics, theology, the church and human nature

I wonder if you can see what I'm saying?

I'm saying that here we are at the beginning of God's great kingdom under God's great king David.

We are at the beginning of the Davidic kingdom.

This kingdom will shape the expectations of God's people for the rest of time.

But this kingdom is haunted by humans with their own agendas.

It is full of people who are affected by the desire for power.

It is full of people who are political animals.

It is full of people who are willing to use other people to get their own will and their own way.

It is full of people who will use profoundly theological language to justify what is really their own grab for power.

It is full of people saturated with a lust for revenge and blood.

Friends, the point is so potent isn't it?

You see, what we see in this passage is what we see in our churches.

We are the citizens of a new kingdom headed by great David's greater son, Jesus Christ.

But we are still tainted with the same brush as the people we see here.

And so our churches are so often places where we are haunted by our own agendas.

We are affected by a desire for power.

We so often turn to politics rather than justice and righteousness and prayer.

We seek to bring in God's kingdom by our own machinations.

We are willing to use other people to get our own will and our own way.

We sometimes use profoundly theological language to do it.

And we hold on to bitterness and often seek revenge.

Friends, this is not the way that our Lord did things.

He was not like David.

He accomplished things on a cross and in weakness.

And we, his people, are to be people of the cross who follow him.

Let's not bring the world into our churches.

Let's hold the Lord Jesus and his methods high in our dealings with each other.

Let's ask God to transform us into the likeness of his Son.