

THE PRICE OF PEACE

2 Samuel 3:1-21

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Abner said to David, "I will arise and go and will gather all Israel to my lord the king, that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may reign over all that your heart desires." So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace (2 Sam. 3:21).

“There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David” (2 Sam. 3:1). With these words, the sacred narrator introduces the challenge laid upon David in 2 Samuel chapter 3. Long wars try the patience of men and test their character. Flaws are developed and revealed, while leadership is honed and national destinies are forged.

For David, coming on the heels of his years of frustration as a fugitive from tyranny, the long war with the house of Saul must have been particularly trying. Years earlier, the prophet Samuel had anointed David as the man whom God had selected to reign over the people. Many years of trials and sorrow later, God’s promise may have seemed as a phantom that haunted his waking hours. Now, with Saul dead, David’s claim was prolonging a civil war at a time when Israel was perilously weak and vulnerable. John Calvin suggests that David must have considered giving up his cause, thinking, “My kingdom is cursed by God, because I see the people torn into pieces. Would it not be better for me to withdraw so that there can be union?”¹

David did not, however, give up his cause, perhaps because he knew that God’s gifts and calling are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). Believers will often consider such times of struggle as wasted years, when in

¹ John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel I-13*, trans. Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 92-93.

fact the vital forming of their character and faith is taking place. So it was for David. During the long war, he practiced himself in the discipline of waiting on the Lord, biding his time and avoiding any action that might sap the strength of the nation he hoped to unite. Here is wisdom in secular and spiritual government: David commits himself always to foster the unity and peace of the covenant people, a practice he commends especially to leaders in the church today.

On the personal level, however, David consoled himself with moral compromises, perhaps thinking them minor allowances in light of his public faithfulness to duty. As such, 2 Samuel 3 lays a foundation of compromise that will shake David's life and reign in the chapters to come. David and Israel will be blessed by his faithfulness and wisdom as the leader of God's people, but all that David achieves on the public stage will be undermined and threatened by his failure to challenge himself to holiness in his private affairs.

THE HOUSE OF DAVID STRENGTHENED

After the death of Saul and the defeat of his army, Israel was placed in a dangerous situation. In the north, Saul's cousin and general Abner regathered the remnants of the Saulide strength and retreated east of the Jordan, ceding much of the northern region to the Philistines. From that position, Abner opposed the Philistines and sought to bolster Saul's house by setting forth the king's son Ishbosheth as Israel's new king. In the southern region of Judah, David had taken the crown and gathered his forces at Hebron. In chapter 2 we are told of a bloody battle between these two factions, as Abner tested David's strength and was routed at the pool of Gibeon. David refrained from following up the victory with an assault on his rival, minimizing the shedding of Israelite blood and avoiding the hardening of hatred between the factions of God's people.

There were probably observers of David's policy who thought it evidence of weakness, but as the long war progressed they were shown to be mistaken. As David waited upon the Lord, trusting God's promise and refusing to act in a way that might injure God's people, "David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker" (2 Sam. 3:1). David embodies a principle that will be generally proved in the life of believers: as we

conduct our affairs with an eye on God's will and a patient obedience to his Word, we will find our spiritual resources building and God's blessing becoming evident even in our trials.

David's growing strength is described in terms of the increase of his harem and especially in the abounding of sons: "And sons were born to David at Hebron: his firstborn was Amnon, of Ahinoam of Jezreel; and his second, Chileab, of Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel; and the third, Absalom the son of Maacah the daughter of Talmai king of Geshur; and the fourth, Adonijah the son of Haggith; and the fifth, Shephatiah the son of Abital; and the sixth, Ithream, of Eglah, David's wife. These were born to David in Hebron" (2 Sam. 3:2-5).

To appreciate the value of these wives and sons we need to think from the perspective of the ancient Near Eastern world. An abundance of sons normally meant a large and growing company of trusted leaders to deploy the resources of one's kingdom. Many sons meant a line of succession that was secure and a future that would be strong. Careful study of David's wives also reveals a growing political strength. Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail of Carmel secured David's political base in southern Judah. David's marriage to Maacah was evidently a political arrangement, since her father "Talmai king of Geshur" ruled a society just north of Ish-Bosheth's base east of the Jordan. Through this arrangement, David secured an ally who would help neutralize the house of Saul. The remaining wives are mainly unknown, but they played their part in supplying David with an increasing fund of sons. Through these marriages and with sons growing around him, David's position strengthened during his years of waiting at Hebron.

However impressive David's situation may have been to the Near-Eastern eye, there was a problem when considered from a biblical point of view. The problem was that David's practice of polygamy was a clear and grievous violation of God's Word. In the beginning of the Bible, marriage was instituted as a covenant union between one man and one woman (Gen. 2:18-25). David's accumulation of wives directly overturned God's ordinance. Moreover, the law's instructions for Israel's kings specifically prohibited David's conduct. Kings were not to indulge their fleshly desires but were to set an example in personal self-control and spirituality. Deuteronomy 17:17

specifies: “he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away.”

Some commentators counter this viewpoint by pointing out that the text of 2 Samuel 3 includes no condemnation of David’s royal harem, which after all was an expected institution in his times. Where, then, is the Bible’s negative critique of David’s polygamy? The answer is found in the record of David’s life and even in the calumny of the succession of rulers who would follow after him in the book of Kings.

It is true that David was strengthened with many sons from his many wives. But consider the history of the names provided in this account. At the head of the list is Amnon, who raped his half-sister Tamar and was murdered by his brother Absalom. Chileab, David’s second son, does not figure in future accounts, which suggests that he may have died in youth. The third son, Absalom, not only murdered his half brother Amnon but went on to commit treason against David, dividing the kingdom in civil war. Adonijah, the fourth son, bided his time until the end of David’s life, when he opposed his father’s will be staging a coup against the designated successor, David’s later son, Solomon. In this history we see the judgment of God upon the grievous wickedness of David’s multiplying of wives.

God’s law prohibited Israel’s kings from possessing harems to avoid having their hearts turned away from God. In other words, polygamy leads a man to indulge himself in virtually ceaseless sensual pleasures so that his flesh begins to dominate over his spiritual life. Instead of the situation ordained by God, in which a man and woman enter into holy partnership for mutual help and sanctification, polygamy puffs up a man’s pride. Polygamy promotes the very vices that Christian marriage is intended to restrain and avoids the virtues that biblical marriage is designed to promote. According to John Calvin, the effect of polygamy in the life even of so great a spiritual giant as David was to make of him “a dissolute and thoroughly immoral man.”² This situation would be seen most clearly in the virtual destruction of the glorious reign of David’s son, King Solomon, who multiplied not only his pagan wives but also the idols they brought into Jerusalem.

² Ibid., 95.

Whereas marriage is designed to promote unity and harmony within the home, polygamy gives birth to a viperous den of intrigue and competition. No wife can ever be secure in her relationship when she is only one of many women to share her husband's bed. Throughout the Bible, from the time when Abraham took Sarah's maidservant Hagar into his embrace, polygamy has corrupted female society so that the household of a polygamist is certain to be one of internal strife and woe. In contrast, a biblical marriage is designed to secure the rights of both husband and wife and result in a covenant bond of unity and peace for parents and children alike. Calvin argues that polygamy is so inherently abusive to women that even so deplorable a practice as divorce, which assails the sanctity of marriage, is preferable to the multiplying of wives in a harem.³

Given so clear a biblical abhorrence of polygamy, what would cause a man of faith like David to fall into so great a sin? Many answers suggest themselves. First, while the practice was forbidden in Scripture it was widely approved in the surrounding culture. For David to have many wives would strengthen his image in the eyes of people whose opinion could help him greatly. Second, the political alliances gained through his marriages were a great practical help to David in bolstering his kingdom and undermining his enemies. The name Talmai king of Geshur may not mean much to us, but we can be sure that it meant something to David and his fellow powerbrokers. Third, it seems that David simply permitted himself this indulgence. He was, after all, beset with many frustrations in his public life: what harm would be done in securing a little extra comfort and private pleasure? A. W. Pink answers: "Here, then, was David's besetting sin, to which he yielded so freely... And a Holy God will not tolerate evil, least of all in those whom He has made leaders over His people... [David's] giving way to [this sin] brought down long and severe chastenings, and the record of it as a whole... is for our learning and warning."⁴

How much better would David's history have been had he resisted this temptation, or having initially indulged himself to have repented and turned back to the calling of God's Word. David reminds us all,

³ Ibid., 95.

⁴ A. W. Pink, *A Life of David*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 2:255-6.

but especially men called to positions of authority and privilege, of our urgent need to advance in holiness, cutting off prior roots of sin and diligently offering up our private lives to the obedience of God in increasing conformity to the character of Christ.

WEAKNESS AND DIVISION IN THE HOUSE OF SAUL

While David was adding his wives, Ish-bosheth, the rival king of the house of Saul, was unable to control his concubines. This is at least one of the ways in which “the house of Saul became weaker and weaker” (2 Sam. 3:1). Ish-bosheth confronted his uncle and general, Abner, accusing him of infiltrating the royal harem: “Now Saul had a concubine whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. And Ish-bosheth said to Abner, “Why have you gone in to my father’s concubine?” (2 Sam. 3:7). In the ancient world, a king’s harem was passed to the possession of his successor. So for Abner to take one of Saul’s former wives was tantamount to a coup against his nephew.

We do not know whether Ish-bosheth’s accusation was true or not, although the statement that “Abner was making himself strong in the house of Saul” (2 Sam. 3:6) suggests that it was. It is clear that Abner considered the nephew he had put upon the throne as little more than a puppet to be used and a fool to be disgraced. Despite the fact that he had pledged fealty and honor to Ish-bosheth, Abner thought little of consorting with one of his concubines.

When Ish-bosheth confronted Abner, the king-making general exploded in indignation: “Abner was very angry over the words of Ish-bosheth and said, “Am I a dog’s head of Judah? To this day I keep showing steadfast love to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers, and to his friends, and have not given you into the hand of David. And yet you charge me today with a fault concerning a woman” (2 Sam. 3:7). Notice that Abner did not deny the affront and sin, but only responded that his loyalty to Saul’s house accorded him the right. With this, Abner expressed such disgust over the king he had enthroned that he now pledged to throw his support over to David’s side: “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 over Judah, from Dan to Beersheba. And Ish-bosheth could not answer Abner another word, because he feared him” (2 Sam. 3:9-11). Abner’s example reminds us of how difficult it is for the proud to endure even a justified rebuke. His erratic behavior warns us to be willing to receive honest criticism. When we enter into sin we should not dig ourselves deeper through pride but rather be eager to extract ourselves through humble repentance.

Abner’s disloyal treatment of Ishbosheth is merely an instance of the general tendency for those who have rebelled against God also to rebel against one another. William Blaikie writes: “How often we see that godless men banded together have no firm bond of union; the very passions which they are united to gratify begin to rage against one another; they fall into the pit which they digged for others; they are hanged on the gallows which they erected for their foes.”⁵ Realizing this provides all the more reason why Christians should avoid entering into leagues with the ungodly.

This division in Saul’s house must mainly be attributed to God’s working on David’s behalf. David was waiting on the Lord, and the Lord had his own time to work on David’s behalf. How much to David’s benefit it would be in years to come that he played no direct role in the extinction of Saul’s house, but rather left it to the Lord to deal with the Lord’s own enemies.

Moreover, we should note the irony in Abner’s calling on the Lord and citing God’s Word as the justification for his betrayal of Ishbosheth: “God do so to Abner and more also, if I do not accomplish for David what the LORD has sworn to him” (2 Sam. 3:9). We may be certain that zeal for God’s honor played no role in Abner’s defection. Blaikie is undoubtedly right when he suspects that “Abner had begun to see that the cause of Ishbosheth was hopeless, and was even glad in his secret heart of an excuse for abandoning an undertaking which could bring neither success nor honor.”⁶

In reciting God’s promise to David, Abner was setting the seal to his own condemnation for making civil war against the Lord’s true

⁵ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of Second Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

anointed servant. He might have well declared, “I have been opposed to God in my insolence and pride. Yet I am so arrogant that I will allow this to be seen by everyone just to spite you for daring to criticize my sin.” Calvin writes: “Thus when we see that God reproves his enemies and those who despise his majesty, let us fear becoming like them, since the Holy Scripture so frequently warns us against this.”⁷ Yet we glorify God in that his will is established and his truth is proclaimed even from the lips of those who seal their own judgment by their own words. Abner’s confession provides one more reason for believers to trust in the Lord to advance the cause of his people: whereas God provides a free salvation to those who trust in him, the wicked not only pay the ticket for their own transit to hell but also offer tithes for the upbuilding of God’s kingdom.

ABNER’S EMBASSY TO DAVID

Abner may not have kept his vow of fealty to Ish-bosheth, but he did keep his promise to betray the house of Saul to the house of David. “Abner sent messengers to David on his behalf, 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’” (2 Sam. 3:12). Notice how Abner speaks as the one in the position of supremacy, as if he was able to dictate to David terms of a united nation. One might think that Abner had never done David any wrong, despite his years of leading Saul’s efforts to persecute David and more recently seven years of unjust civil war against David’s throne. Clearly, Abner expected David to leap at the offer of an expedient new alliance, completely oblivious to the wisdom by which God’s people shun such arrangements.

To David’s credit, he was inclined to do no such thing. Instead, he immediately set Abner back on his heels with a royal demand: “Good; I will make a covenant with you. But one thing I require of you; that is, you shall not see my face unless you first bring Michal, Saul’s daughter, when you come to see my face” (2 Sam. 3:13). David followed this up by sending messengers not to Abner but to Ish-

⁷ Calvin, *2 Samuel*, 105.

bosheth, saying, “Give me my wife Michal, for whom I paid the bridal price of a hundred foreskins of the Philistines” (2 Sam. 3:14).

By means of this demand, David accomplished a number of desirable outcomes. First, Abner was put in his place, having to approach David as a suppliant who offers gifts, and not as a partner in crime as Abner clearly desired. Second, David upheld at least a semblance of legitimacy to his transactions, appealing not to Abner but to Ish-bosheth for the return of his first wife. Abner was thus reduced to the status of a middleman, a servant in the dealings between two men who had the right to be treated as kings. Third, it is doubtful that David demanded Michal’s return out of sentiment or loving affection. Nor was he interested in her return for his stated reason: the unusual bridal price he gave to Saul for her hand, which required David to risk his life in deadly combat with numerous Philistines. Most likely, David sought a return of Michal because the renewal of his marriage to Saul’s daughters would strengthen to Saul’s throne and make it easier for the northern tribes to transfer their loyalty. Moreover, given David’s former alliance with the enemy Philistines it did not hurt to remind Ish-bosheth’s followers of how David had once been the scourge of the enemy they now sought a leader to oppose.

The return of Michal presents a scene that is as sad as it is pathetic: “Ish-bosheth sent and took her from her husband Paltiel the son of Laish. But her husband went with her, weeping after her all the way to Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, ‘Go, return.’ And he returned” (2 Sam. 3:15-16). This reminds us that liaisons that begin in sin seldom end in rejoicing. Our hearts may go out to poor Paltiel as he attempts to follow his wife on her journey to be restored to her proper marriage, until we remember that his relationship with Michal had been adulterous from the start. Blaikie comments: “All we can say about him is, that his sin lay in receiving another man’s wife and treating her as his own... the tears of Phaltiel would not have flowed now if that unfortunate man had acted firmly and honourably when Michal was taken from David.”⁸

With Abner having offered a covenant to David, and with Ish-bosheth having handed over his sister to his rival, the rebellion against

⁸ Blaikie, *2 Samuel*, 45.

David's rule was now tottering. Abner, ever aware of which way the wind was blowing, brokered the final capitulation:

And Abner conferred with the elders of Israel, saying, "For some time past you have been seeking David as king over you. Now then bring it about, for the LORD has promised David, saying, 'By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines, and from the hand of all their enemies.'" Abner also spoke to Benjamin. And then Abner went to tell David at Hebron all that Israel and the whole house of Benjamin thought good to do (2 Sam. 3:17-19).

Abner's reasoning is noteworthy. First, he forced the elders of Israel to admit for that had long been hoping for a chance to give their allegiance to David. For all his faults, David's faith in God had shown the value of the true kingship established by God. Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 5:16). With God's favor so evidently upon David, and remembering David's earlier prowess against Philistine warriors like the giant Goliath, the elders were eager to have such a man as their king. We should see this as an instance of God's grace, providing for Israel and commending to them the king after God's own heart. Here is God's gracious ending to the dark episode in Israel's history that began when Israel's elders demanded "a king... like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5). Saul had been that worldly king, and after his defeat Israel had been ruled by a puppet held up by a gangster general. Now, Abner chided them, their eyes had been looking longingly at the godliness and blessing of David. "Now bring it about," he urged them. Abner added a reminder of God's promise, "By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines, and from the hand of all their enemies" (2 Sam. 3:18). The marvel of God's grace is that he allowed Israel's rebel elders to return to his rule after only the one defeat at Mount Gilboa and the seven years of chaos under Abner and the puppet Ish-bosheth. In Psalm 103, David would celebrate the grace of God that expressed itself in the elders' turning to the kingship of David:

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust (Ps. 103:8-10, 14).

A BETTER PEACE

When Abner arrived at Hebron, David was gracious to receive him in peace: “When Abner came with twenty men to David at Hebron, David made a feast for Abner and the men who were with him. And Abner said to David, ‘I will arise and go and will gather all Israel to my lord the king, that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may reign over all that your heart desires.’ So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace” (2 Sam. 3:20-21).

Receiving and treating with his enemy may have been unpleasant to David, but he wisely accepted what was, for all its base motives, a sincere offer to restore Israel to peace. Paul exhorts Christians, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). In this, David sets our example. There was no point exercising his many grievances against Abner’s person: the Saulide general was delivering a peace that Israel badly needed and, so it seemed, Abner was God’s instrument in fulfilling his long-awaited promise to David. If accepting Abner’s embassy was the price of peace, David was eager to pay it. Yet he wisely had avoided making any promises to Abner about a future role in his kingdom, whatever hopes the enemy general may have nurtured. Simply by standing firm in his faith in the Lord, avoiding sin, promoting peace and unity so far as he was able, David was now presented with the kingdom he had long known to be rightfully his. The civil war was over, David’s coronation was being arranged, and a united Israel could now begin to strengthen herself against her foes. It was not the best peace, but it was the peace God had provided to David, who had waited on the Lord for his salvation and blessing. David thus concluded Abner’s embassy with a feast to welcome peace, after which Abner departed, the long war having ended.

This sordid period in Israel’s history commends to us a number of lessons. We are reminded of God’s sovereign power, by which the Lord accomplishes his holy will even through the wicked deeds of sinful men. Those who wait upon the Lord can scarcely imagine the timing of their deliverance, and the means that God ultimately

chooses will often cause believers to marvel in praise of God's mighty hand. David had learned this lesson, after many false starts and errors during his years as a fugitive from King Saul. He explained the lesson in Psalm 27:14: "Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!" (Ps. 27:14).

David's example also urges us to value highly the peace and unity of the church. Paul exhorted the his readers to prize unity high above any personal preference or agenda: "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, [be] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2-3).

As we wait upon the Lord, living in peace with others so far as possible, and especially prizing unity and harmony within the church, we look to Jesus for a better peace than David was able to achieve through the agency of evil Abner. Jesus entered into no parlay with the enemies of our soul: Satan, sin, and death. Instead, Jesus struck to the ground all that threatens our peace through the blood of his cross. The price of true peace is the precious blood of Christ, which anyone can receive through simple faith in his name. "My peace I give to you," Jesus says. "Not as the world gives do I give to you" (Jn. 14:27).

We look to Jesus and the Bible tells us, "he himself is our peace" (Eph. 2:14), having removed the offense of our sin before God, having made in his resurrection a new people blessed by the peace of God, and securing by his eternal reign a perfect and eternal peace that will never end. In Christ's peace, "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together, and a little child shall lead them." Christ says "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:6, 9). It is to that peace that we look in the reign of Christ. And it is out of the peace that he gives that we wait upon the Lord, remembering his words: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Mt. 5:9).