

BLOODY JUSTICE, SEVERE MERCY

2 Samuel 4:1-12

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

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And the king said to his servants, “Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel? And I was gentle today, though anointed king” (2 Sam. 3:38-39).

In Psalm 37, David gave advice that he was often called upon to practice. The psalm urges us to wait upon the Lord, which means to patiently permit the Lord to provide godly solutions. “Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act,” David wrote. “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him” (Ps. 37:5-7).

This was the very counsel David needed in the period between the death of Abner, David’s main adversary, and David’s coronation as king over all Israel. David knew *what* should happen, but there did not seem to be good *ways* to achieve it. Abner had brokered a peace that would unite all Israel under David’s rule, but David’s own general Joab had slain Abner in hatred and jealousy. While David had properly mourned Abner, proving that he had no part in the murder, there was still the problem of Ish-Bosheth. This man was the son of the previous king, Saul, and David’s rival for Israel’s throne. Ish-Bosheth had been weakened to the point of impotence by Abner’s defection, but as of yet he had not surrendered and the northern tribes had not yet renounced him for David. David might march in force on Ish-Bosheth, but that would not be a very good way to woo one’s future subjects, nor would it go well with the idea of a godly kingship that David was supposed to represent. The alternative was to wait, pray, and look to the Lord to provide a godly avenue for advance. For following the advice of his psalm, David was richly rewarded by God’s intervention that placed him on the throne.

BLOODY MURDER

If David found it hard to wait upon the Lord during this tense interlude, Ish-Bosheth and his followers found the situation far more distressing. 2 Samuel 4 begins: “When Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, heard that Abner had died at Hebron, his courage failed, and all Israel was dismayed” (v. 1). Literally, the Hebrew text says that Ish-bosheth’s “hands dropped,” which is a way of saying that he lost courage. When John Balliol abdicated as King of Scotland in 1296, the royal arms were torn from his surcoat, giving him the name “Toom Tabard,” or “empty suit.” This is what Ish-bosheth had become without the military support of Abner¹. Seeing that their supposed king was unable to fulfill his function as their war leader, all his supporters in the northern tribes were “dismayed.”

Ish-Bosheth and his followers show how easily overthrown are the wicked who seem to pose so deadly a threat to God’s people. John Calvin comments: “Let us not doubt, when we see the enemies of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, that it will take nothing to make them broken people, who will not know which way to turn. And why? Because they do not have God on their side; they cannot call on him.”² Jesus once said that true faith is revealed by its perseverance under trial, where a false faith, having no root, withers under tribulation (Mt. 13:20-21). David had his unwise and unbelieving moments, but in the darkest trials his faith bore him to safety. He was like a brave soldier who is sometimes taken by surprise and driven back, or sometimes weary so as to halt the advance, but who always recovers and returns undaunted to the battle. Ish-bosheth, in contrast, was like a braggart who boasts when the enemy is running but shrinks in the face of determined opposition. What made David different? William Blaikie observes that David was “upheld by the consciousness of a higher strength,” being able to turn in prayer “to the ‘secret place of the Most High,’ taking hold of Him as his covenant God.” Unlike Ish-Bosheth, David’s true faith gave him the inspiration and strength he needed to prevail under trial.³

¹ Gordon J. Keddie, *Triumph of the King: The Message of 2 Samuel* (Durham, UK: Evangelical Press, 1990), 33.

² John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel I-13*, trans. Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 144.

³ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of Second Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 57.

Unbelievers are easily overthrown because they are unable to call on God, and also because of the wicked company with whom they inevitably associate. A prime example is the case of Ish-Bosheth's raiding captains, Baanah and Rechab. Rimmon, their father, was "a man of Benjamin from Beeroth," a place from which we are told "the Beerothites fled to Gittaim and have been sojourners there to this day" (2 Sam. 4:2-3). The Bible does not tell of this episode, except that Beeroth was a dwelling of the Gibeonites, a people placed under Israel's protection but whom Saul wickedly put to the sword and plundered (Jos. 9:17; 2 Sam. 21:1-6). It seems that these two captains hailed from a family that took part in and benefited from that atrocity. Ruffians like these are drawn to ungodly sources of power, and by employing such men Ish-Bosheth lost his life:

Now the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah, set out, and about the heat of the day they came to the house of Ish-bosheth as he was taking his noonday rest. And they came into the midst of the house as if to get wheat, and they stabbed him in the stomach. Then Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped (2Sa 4:5-6).

This was a craven act of violence and betrayal. The Hebrews text, which gives emphasis by way of repetition, offers additional bloody details: "When they came into the house, as he lay on his bed in his bedroom, they struck him and put him to death and beheaded him. They took his head and went by the way of the Arabah all night" (2 Sam. 4:7). The brothers' assault was efficient as it was detestable. In this way, Ish-Bosheth received a bloody judgment for raising his crown in open violation of God's revealed will. Having given himself to a sinful cause he was slain by wicked hands.

All this reminds us never to envy the wicked in their pride and pleasure, but who possess nothing else before they come under God's inevitable judgment. Ish-bosheth's rebellion against God's anointing of David king (2 Sam. 3:9-10), came to a sordid end that reminds us that sooner or later the wages of sin truly is always death.

THE JUST VENGEANCE OF DAVID

When King Saul died at the battle of Mount Gilboa, an opportunistic Amalekite took the king's crown and armlet and raced to David's base to be the first to share the good news.

Perhaps embellishing, the messenger claimed to have given Saul his death blow at the wounded king's request. Expecting rich reward for this report, the Amelkite was instead put to death by David for his impiety in striking God's anointed king. We would think that word of this event would have spread widely, but the news did not make it to Ish-Bosheth's headquarters. Thus Ish-Bosheth's killers, Baanah and Rechab, arrived unwarned in David's headquarters seeking a reward for slaying his rival to the throne. It is possible that they were warned, but that their minds were corrupted by sin: "Mean and selfish themselves, they thought other men must be the same."⁴ They therefore "brought the head of Ish-bosheth to David at Hebron. And they said to the king, 'Here is the head of Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul, your enemy, who sought your life. The LORD has avenged my lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring'" (2 Sam. 4:8).

This statement reveals the true motives of these murderers. They were disloyal, slaying their sworn lord and fellow Benjamite, Saul's son. The brothers were self-seeking, aiming for personal advantage and unjust reward. Furthermore, they were impious, daring to justify their bloody crime by appeal to God's will. It is undoubtedly true that God had judged Ish-Bosheth through the hands of these wicked men, but having so grossly transgressed God's law they had no right to claim God's endorsement upon their deed.

David's response in pronouncing judgment on these men is to be commended on two levels. David is praised because of *what he did* and also because of *why he did it*. First the *what*: David exercised divine judgment in the form of bloody vengeance on the men who had murdered Ish-Bosheth. David explained his attitude by recalling the earlier occasion where he executed the man who claimed to have struck down Saul: "As the LORD lives, who has redeemed my life out of every adversity, when one told me, 'Behold, Saul is dead,' and thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and killed him at Ziklag, which was the reward I gave him for his news. How much more, when wicked men have killed a righteous man in his own house on his bed, shall I not now require his blood at your hand and destroy you from the earth?" (2 Sam. 4:9-11).

⁴ Ibid., 58.

By beginning his reply with an oath – “As the LORD lives” – David was formally convening his royal court for judgment. This judgment, he determined, would adhere to the punishments of God’s Word. It was not for David to decide his own ideas about crime and punishment, since God had clearly stated the penalty for this kind of wicked deed: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” (Gen. 9:6). So sacred is the life of any man, since every human bears the image of God, that only by the death of the murderer can a murder be avenged. Ish-Bosheth’s slaying fit this crime – this is what David meant by calling him a “righteous man,” meaning that whatever else was true of him, Saul’s son had not given the two captains grounds to slay him justly – and the clear punishment under God’s law for murder was death.

David ordered the sentence to be executed immediately, followed by a public display that was intended to advertise David’s justice: “David commanded his young men, and they killed them and cut off their hands and feet and hanged them beside the pool at Hebron. But they took the head of Ish-bosheth and buried it in the tomb of Abner at Hebron” (2 Sam. 4:12). There are people today who would condemn David for this bloody reprisal, especially since the punishment was meted out so swiftly. However there could be no reasonable doubt as to the brothers’ guilt, since they boasted of the sin and brought the convicting evidence of Ish-Bosheth’s head. David was God’s servant in punishing murder, just as the New Testament teaches that secular rulers today are given the sword – an instrument of death – to be “the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom. 13:4).

By judging Ish-Bosheth’s murderers, David showed innocent to those who might suspect him of conspiracy in the removal of his rival. David had now consistently honored God in all his dealings with Saul and his house. He had refused to take Saul’s life in the cave at En Gedi, since for all his gross crimes Saul was Israel’s anointed king and it was David’s duty to reverence him (1 Sam. 24:1-7), Now David was king and his duty was to execute the men who had killed Saul’s son. In carrying out God’s wrath on sin he proved himself to be “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14) in contrast to king

Saul, who lost his throne precisely for withholding the sword from those upon whom God had commanded death (1 Sam. 15:1-33). Like David, we honor and serve God when we submit to his commands rather than replace God's Word with worldly opinions.

Just as important as what David did is why he did it. He explained to the murderers: "As the LORD lives, who has redeemed my life out of every adversity" (2 Sam. 4:9). This tells us that David was obeying God's requirement out of gratitude for God's saving work in his own life. As one who had experienced God's saving grace, David desired his life to give glory to God. This is one reason he was not willing to receive his kingdom from the bloody hands of murderers. God had been sovereign in mercy to David, so David desired his salvation to come in a way that glorified God in obedience.

Christians should likewise shun sin as that which will dishonor God, who redeemed us with the precious blood of Christ. Moreover as Calvin writes: "Whenever we are tempted to evil, under the excuse of saving our life, under the excuse of ridding ourselves of some worry or anguish, or of having some remedy for our own troubles, let us think: Has not God taken care of us up till now?.. Since, therefore, we have known him to be so merciful to us,... and we have been saved by his hand so many times, should we now abandon him?"⁵

To fully appreciate the godliness of David's action, we need to realize how much relief Ish-Bosheth's murder brought to him, and also how David's rejoicing in this wicked deed would be to commit practical idolatry. God had promised to make David king, so to appeal to any other source, especially sinful men like these brothers, would be to deny God's sufficiency for meeting David's needs. The murderers were claiming to be David's redeemers, saying, "The LORD has avenged my lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring" (2 Sam. 4:8). But David refused, saying, "the LORD... has redeemed my life out of every adversity" (2 Sam. 4:9).

For the same reason that rejected the pleas of Ish-Bosheth's murderers – his gratitude for God's redeeming grace – Christians stand fast against the trials and temptations of the world. Polycarp of Smyrna showed the same Christ-honoring spirit when he refused to

⁵ Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel I-13*, 162.

betray Jesus under the threat of Roman persecution in AD 155. The Roman proconsul threatened to throw Polycarp to the wild beasts if he did not worship Caesar and burn incense to the emperor's statue. Polycarp answered that the Roman should send for the beasts. The proconsul answered that he would be burned alive if he did not curse the name of Christ. The aged bishop answered in the spirit of David, who refused to partake of God-dishonoring sin: "Fifty and six years have I served Christ, and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?" Both men realized that their gratitude to God meant they could not permit anyone but God to gain the glory of their lives.⁶

GOD'S SEVERE MERCY

We have considered 2 Samuel 4 in terms of bloody judgment. In the perspective of David's whole story, however, we should realize that in and through these events God's mercy was at work on behalf of both David and Israel. The chapter begins with David waiting on the Lord, unable to take action to bring his own salvation into effect. So God was himself at work, removing the obstacles and opening the way for David to receive his blessing. God had anointed David to be king in the place of Saul, and it was God's job to fulfill God's promise. David's job was to keep himself free from sin while obeying God's commands. David shows us by his patient obedience that the fastest and best way to enter into God's blessing is to "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him" (Ps. 37:7).

One clue that 2 Samuel 4 is about God's work to handle the problem of Saul's house is the brief account of Jonathan's son Mephibosheth. This boy was five years old when his father died next to king Saul. When the news came, "his nurse took him up and fled, and as she fled in her haste, he fell and became lame" (2 Sam. 4:4). Why is this description found in the chapter relating the details of Ish-Bosheth's murder? The reason is that it shows the various ways God was taking away the ability of Saul's family to threaten David's reign, while at the same time providing David opportunities to exercise godly

⁶ Davis, *2 Samuel*, 47.

judgment so as to commend his reign. Of Saul's two remaining male descendants, one was slain for rebellion and the other, who had not rebelled, was made lame so as to remove him as a threat to David. "Wait for the LORD and keep his way," David had written, "and he will exalt you to inherit the land; you will look on when the wicked are cut off" (Ps. 37:34). This is exactly what happened through his trusting faith in the Lord. It is an example that urges us to wait upon the Lord to meet our needs and defend our interests, refusing to sin and honoring God through a life that obeys his Word.

God was showing mercy not only to David but also to his people Israel. The Lord had ordained that Israel would find salvation only through the house of David, through whom the Savior would someday appear. Israel was stubborn, however, refusing to submit to God's Word, demanding the kind of worldly ruler that Saul represented and rejecting the kind of spiritual rule that David represented. The Lord therefore chastised the Israelites, stripping away the house they had chosen in rebellion to God. God was determined to remove every false support and every source of disobedience to his Word, going so far as to slay one son of Saul and maim another grandson, all so that his people might come to David and gain God's mercy for salvation.

John Calvin comments that this account provides "an example of what God does in us when it pleases him to call us into subjection to our Lord Jesus Christ." Like the Israelites, we are prone to disobedience, foolish willfulness, and rebellion against God's Word. This being the case, God is willing to inflict us with painful suffering, stripping away all that we hold to in the place of Christ. "It is necessary," Calvin writes, "for God to remove the occasions which could prevent and retard us from submission." Moreover, "when God wants to call us to faith, he must not only touch us, so as to live in our hearts by his Holy Spirit, and remould, remake and re-create us new creatures, but he must also cut short all opportunities that we could take to be remiss, or to wander here and there, or to hold back so that we could live to ourselves when we have the chance."⁷ In this way, it was God's mercy that left Israel with no practical option but to turn to

⁷ Calvin, 146-147.

the way of salvation had ordained by the house of David, ultimately through Jesus Christ. Understanding this, we should likewise praise God whenever he removes our idols, however painfully, so that we may be saved through faith in Christ.

God's willingness to take away even good things that we have loved in the place of Christ has been referred to as "severe mercy." This was the title of a book by Sheldon Vanauken, who had professed faith in Jesus after his wife Jean was dramatically converted under the influence of the famous Christian scholar, C. S. Lewis. Van and Jean had been an uncommon couple, so passionately devoted that they make a pact which they called the "Shining Barrier," an agreement that they would do everything together so that everything in their lives were serve to increase their love. They agreed, for instance, to forgo having children, since only Jean could experience motherhood and this would separate her from the crowning love of her husband.

After their conversion to Christianity, however, it soon became clear that Christ intended to invade the Shining Barrier so as to make himself the crowning love of their lives. Van resented this, insisting that his own ideas of love should have preeminence over Christ. Over time, he sought to undermine his wife's fervent faith and to oppose God's Word as it sought to rearrange their habits and priorities. Realizing that her love had become an idol and a barrier to her husband's salvation, Jean offered for the Lord to remove her by death for the spiritual well-being of her spouse. This, it seems, is precisely what the Lord intended, as Jean contracted a strange illness and after a brief struggle died. Her dying words to the man she once had worshiped in place of Christ expressed her joy at the vision of a higher glory into which she was passing: "O darling, look," she cried, directing her husband one last time to the glory of Christ.⁸

Vanauken responded bitterly to the death of the woman he had given his all-consuming love. In attempt to make sense of his feelings he communicated with C. S. Lewis, admitting that he had wanted to keep his wife in the place that Christ demanded for himself. Lewis answered with words that explain God's rough dealing with rebellious Israel and God's disciplining hand in the lives of many of

⁸ Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 175.

his wayward people: “You have been treated with a severe mercy.” It is not God’s wrath, nor God’s malice, that causes God to afflict those whom he intends to save. It is his loving, severe mercy, that would strip away all that stands in the way of true and saving faith, so that God’s people may gain the higher privilege of rejoicing with great wonder at the sight of glory that filled the dying thoughts of Jean Vanauken.

A GREATER THAN DAVID

David was a man who knew many trials and suffered many of God’s severe mercies on the way to his throne. Through them all he had learned to praise the Lord, “who has redeemed my life out of every adversity” (2 Sam. 4:9). David shows us the wisdom of waiting on the Lord to bring us salvation by means of his own choosing. Our part is to obey God’s Word, trusting his promises and fulfilling his commands. God will be faithful to do all that he has promised, even if our wayward hearts require his grace to come to us in a mercy that seems severe.

As we continue to read the Bible, we learn of a greater David who inspires us even more to wait upon the Lord and live for the glory of our Redeemer. It was a glorious thing for Israel to have in David a king who would enforce God’s bloody justice upon the wicked. But in Jesus Christ we have a higher sovereign and a better Savior. Christ is a king who not only inflicts justice on his enemies but who takes upon himself the penalty of his peoples’ sins, offering his own blood to save us from the severe judgment we have deserved. If in our waywardness we find God’s mercy to seem severe, we nonetheless rejoice over every stroke, every loss, and every trial that leads us to the crowning mercy and the glory of knowing Jesus of Christ.