

HOLY AMBITION

2 Samuel 2:1-32

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Your glory, O Israel, is slain on you high places! How the mighty have fallen! (2 Sam. 1:19).

According to Bible scholar Dale Ralph Davis, many Christians spend the majority of their lives in something like what David experienced during his “Hebron stage.” He refers to times when the prospects of God’s kingdom seem poor and when those who serve the Lord “see little of the power and the glory” that we read about in the lives of others. The key to success in such times is to know that God sovereignly reigns and find contentment in his Word.¹

David’s own Hebron stage was challenging to him on several levels. These were years after Israel had fallen in disastrous defeat to their enemies the Philistines. Not only had the Philistine victory over King Saul at Mt. Gilboa scattered the Israelite army, but the removal of the king left Israel’s tribes divided. The challenges before David were not so much with regard to what should be done but rather with how to go about accomplishing the calling God had given him. David’s Hebron phase called for a patient faith that waited on the promises of God. As it turns out, this was one of the great periods of David’s life in which the value of faith and biblical wisdom shines brightly. David’s actions in 2 Samuel 3 show us the difference between a faithful servant who burns with a holy ambition to serve God and David’s rivals with their unholy ambition to serve themselves at any cost.

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1999), 29.

DAVID'S HOLY AMBITION

It simply was not possible for David to look on Israel's situation after the defeat and death of King Saul and not to get involved again in the life of his nation. For some years, David had lived as an exile among the enemy Philistines, fleeing by necessity the crazed malice of Israel's king and thereby removing himself from the life of his nation. One the messenger came to him, however, with news of defeat and Saul's death, David knew that he had to return to Israel and offer his leadership to the nation.

This placed David in a situation that Christians will find themselves in. He was gifted and experienced, and he knew himself called for serve and even leadership among God's people. By God's anointing, David had ambitions for his service in Israel. Likewise, Christians will become aware of gifts and will see needs in the church that their experience has fitted them to meet. The question is how to govern our ambitions in a holy way, genuinely offering our service without advancing our personal cause or glory?

The example that David provides should inform Christian who likewise believe themselves called to serve or lead. "David inquired of the LORD, 'Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah?'" (2 Sam. 2:1). Facing a difficult decision, David took counsel of the Lord. Gathered still with his band of soldiers and their families in Ziklag, he lead his thoughts before the Lord and sought an answer. In other words, before taking this important decision, David sought the will of God. We should do the same before making any significant decision, and especially when it comes to taking a lead in the affairs of Christ's church.

In following the life of David from his appearance in 1 Samuel, we have noted that the ups and downs of his life can be charted by the evidence for his relationship with God. When David is acting in fear or panic, there is inquiring of God, so that David often flees one problem into the arms of another. When David is active in faith, however, we see him praying to God and waiting on God's Word. This is the example we should follow from his life. John Calvin comments: "The true way to distinguish brave from foolhardy action is just this: to ascertain the will of God... Before we commit

ourselves, we must know that a particular course of action is the will of God, and that he approves what we are doing.”² How are we to discern the difference between timid hesitancy and prudent counsel? Where is the difference between rash folly and bold faith? The answer can usually be discerned only with the wisdom that God gives.

We are not told the mechanics of how David inquired of the Lord. Possibly, he approached God through the means of divining provided to the high priest, the Urim and Thumim. The answer that David received, however, seems to give more specific information than could be conveyed through lots. It is also possible that David turned to God in prayer, receiving specific guidance through some form of special revelation. God’s answer to David was decisive: “Go up.”

In our era of history, believers seek counsel from God in two ways: God’s Word and prayer. We should not expect the Bible to give us specific information about the name of who we should marry, the job we should accept, or the city we should live in. But the Scriptures do tell us what priorities and attitudes honor God and what pursuits a follower of Christ should undertake. The Scriptures will tell us that we are not to advance for our glory but Christ’s. We are not to advance ourselves ahead of others, but allow others a leading place until God should see fit to move us up (see Lk. 14:8-10). The second way Christians seek guidance from God is through prayer. Believers do not receive information from God in prayer, but rather we ask God for the wisdom and spiritual discernment needed to apply his Word to our situations. James wrote, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (Ja. 1:5). Through God’s Word and prayer, we are delivered from fleshly thinking and we experience God’s renewing grace for our hearts and mind. In this way, Paul says, “by testing, you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

David further sets a good example by desiring not only general direction from God but specific counsel. He responded by asking, “To which shall I go up?” God answered, “To Hebron” (2 Sam. 2:1).

² John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel I-13*, trans. Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 49-50.

Like David, we should seek through God’s Word to receive specific guidance rather than mere general pointers. Whether we are wondering about service in the church, leadership in the world, or relationships in the home, the Bible gives detailed commands and precepts that we should seek through prayerful study. If we are eager to be taught and led of God, we can be sure that he is willing to guide us. Calvin writes, “Let us, then, boldly run to him and continue doing so (Heb. 4:16) and we will find that we have in him a faithful guide all our life.”³ Especially when making important decisions, we should seek God’s will through prayer and the searching of his Word, eagerly looking for God’s answer both in our circumstances and in the detailed instruction of his Word.

The first mark of someone pursuing a holy ambition is that God’s guidance is sought. The second mark is that God’s Word is confirmed in their subsequent actions. We see this when David went up to Hebron and “the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah” (2 Sam. 2:4).

The question has been raised as to whether it was proper for the men of Judah to anoint David as king, since God had already anointed David through the actions of the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 16:13). The concern is two-fold: did their action indicate a discontent with the prior anointing, and did their anointing David as king of Judah involve a downgrading of God’s will, since David had been anointed by Samuel as king over all Israel? The answer seems to be that the men of Judah were merely confirming God’s known so far as they were able to do so. They could not answer for the other eleven tribes, but in the meantime they would confirm what God had ordained by anointing David over them as king. If we are likewise gripped by a holy desire to serve God’s cause, we will do likewise, confirming in our teaching, our decisions, and in our actions as much of what God has ordained in his Word as we are able to do.

A third sign of that David’s was a holy ambition is that when he had been made king he saw that God’s peace was pursued. *Jabesh-Gilead* (v. 4-7). *Reaching out to potential enemies – praising what is good – offering to affirm all that is obedient to God – appealing to them to*

³ Ibid., 54.

honor God by supporting David's reign. In this way, David honored God: WC, 134: "A hand of friendship was cautiously extended to bridge the many divisions in Israel which had been created by Saul's impetuous leadership."

In David's example we see a model for how holy ambition may be pursued. First, God's guidance was sought. Second, God's Word was confirmed. Third, God's peace was pursued. Finally, and as a result, God's help was enjoyed. *Hebron was an ideal spot, where David was received enthusiastically. 1) a city he had helped; 2) wives with good connections – v. 2; 3) willingness of the people to agree with God's will for David; 4) encouraging openings with which to advance the cause of unity and peace among God's people.*

ABNER'S UNHOLY AMBITION

Sometimes it is easier for us to understand biblical principles by means of a negative example, rather than merely a positive one. If that is the case, we are well served in 2 Samuel 2 by the unholy ambition pursued by David's chief rival, Saul's relative, Abner.

In direct contrast to David's example in acting only having subordinated his own will to that of God, in Abner we see the will to self-rule vividly displayed. "But Abner the son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim" (2 Sam. 2:8). Mahanaim was a prominent city on the east of the Jordan, where the leaders of Saul's northern supporters had been forced to retreat by the Philistines. Abner "made him king over Gilead and the Ashurites and Jezreel and Ephraim and Benjamin and all Israel" (2 Sam. 2:9). We know that the period of David's reign in Hebron was seven and a half years, so it seems that Abner openly ruled in the north for five years, using Ish-bosheth, Saul's remaining son, as a puppet king for the final two years of this period of confusion and Philistine harassment. "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" (2 Sam. 2:11).

Abner's ruse to prop up Ish-bosheth as king shows that the general was aware that he had no warrant to serve as leader for Israel. Moreover, in a time of national danger, his usurpation of power put

the entire people in peril. Yet Abner's desire for prominence and power was so great that he willingly had harm to the people for the sake of his own ambition.

We are shown by Abner how greatly we should loathe that any sense of personal calling or desire for service – and especially any clearly sinful desire for power or precedence – should do injury in the household of God. It is possible that Abner rated his leadership so highly that he thought only by this usurpation could Israel be saved. Yet, Calvin comments, “We have here a mirror to show us how pride and haughtiness is a mortal plague which is bound to dissipate the Church of God, of which the reign of David was a type.”⁴ For five years, Abner pitted himself against the Philistines in attempts to loosen their grip on the northern regions, yet he would not take the action that would most benefit Israel when that required him to step aside to allow the kingship of David over the nation.

Second, Abner shows his unholy ambition not only by the self-will that he displayed but in his rejection of the Word of God. Even though Saul and Abner had known of David's anointing as Israel's true king, Abner's combination of selfish ambition and factional hostility towards David led him to oppose God's Word in brazen fashion.

If we have any doubt that Abner knew that God had willed David's kingship over Israel, that doubt is dispelled in 3:18, when Abner admitted to the elders of Israel that God had said, “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.” This being the case, C. F. Keil rightly states that “The promotion of Ishbosheth as king was not only a continuation of the hostility of Saul towards David, but also an open act of rebellion against Jehovah, who had rejected Saul and chosen David prince over Israel. . . , [so] that even Saul had been convinced of the appointment of David to be his successor upon the throne.”⁵

In the unholy ambition of those who not only set themselves above the fellow men but also set their will against the Word of God, we

⁴ Calvin, 64.

⁵ C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 292.

also see how the wickedness of man in sin is proved. “And the battle was very fierce that day. And Abner and the men of Israel were beaten before the servants of David” (2 Sam. 2:17). *Abner’s invasion and crass spectacle of combat: v. 12-16. The delighting in killing and warfare bears testimony to man’s gross depravity. The slaying of men and women who bear God’s image. All the more terrible in that these were brothers in the nation of Israel!* Calvin: “No victory in a civil war is desirable. We ought not, I say, to have victory over domestic enemies. Why? Because the Church of God will, to that degree, be reduced in number; much blood will be shed.” P. 73.

An unholy ambition like Abner’s may be identified by its will to self-rule, its displays, the Word of God it rejects, and the wickedness of man that it proves. A final evidence of ungodly pride is seen in that the wicked are opposed by God. The Bible depicts worldly opposition to the reign of Christ and his Word in Psalm 2: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill” (Ps. 2:1-6). The psalm reminds us, and Abner’s experience shows us that you cannot succeed in opposition to God’s will and to his anointed king. Far better, as Psalm 2 concludes, to “Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps. 2:11-12).

THE DEADLY GRIEFS OF HUMAN STRIFE

David’s

- a. We have no choice but to oppose the wicked. Warfare with evil nations; opposition to false teaching in the church; protection against those whose relationships will be harmful to our families and children.

- b. Grief #1: The difficulty in restraining our passions. Asahel: vv. 18-23. 1) *Foolish desire for worldly pride in martial prowess.* 2) *Excessive passion in doing harm to those who might be our friends.* 3) *Unrestrained passions leading us into evil. Pope Urban II and the First Crusade (1095). Started spiritual corruption through indulgences; religious hysteria based on a lust for riches and glory; slaughter of innocents along the way, waste and slaughter in a foolish war.* 4) *David's wisdom in restraining himself – 7 years of biding his time and waiting on God, his own non-participation.*
- c. Grief #2: The devouring sword: vv. 24-28 1) *The sword is bitter. The real wages of warfare.* 2) *The death of our fellow men, who bear the image of God.* “That battles are grievous and hard even when only a small number of people die, is a strong and truthful description when we consider that the ones involved are those who claim the name of God and profess to be his people and Church.” JC, 85-6. 3) *When we must fight, we must always do so with the greatest restraint possible, relying on God to grant us victory so that we do not violate his Word and treating our fellow men as image-bearers whose lives are precious, seeking a better peace always.*
- d. Grief 3: The difficulty and rarity of real repentance: vv. 29-32.

UNDER ROYAL PROTECTION

David's lament

- a. This passage shows our need of a royal protector. The anointing at Hebron announces good news: DRD: “Here, for the first time, Yahweh's chosen king visibly rules on earth... It was a small beginning, but it is the kingdom of God – concrete, visible, earthly.” P. 28. Like the mustard seed of Jesus' parable, it promises to grow, just as it will grow wherever the Word of Christ is preached and received in faith.

- b. The grave peril of refusing the king whom God has appointed to rule over heaven and earth.

RE: “God has an anointed King today just as he did at that time. He has decreed that the Lord Jesus Christ is ultimately going to rule and reign over all. He has declared that every knee is going to bow before him and every tongue is going to confess that he is Lord of all (Phil. 2:9-11). But just as Abner did not happily embrace the word that David was to be king over all Israel, so many today refuse to embrace the word that Jesus Christ is God’s anointed.” 131-2.

- c. We live in our Hebron stage in way that honors God’s will, serves Christ’s kingdom, and waits upon him for the fulfillment of all his promises.
- d. The King whom God has anointed is the true king of peace, and, like David with Jabesh-Gilead, he offers us peace with heaven, peace on earth, and peace with God. He says, “Now may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you” (2:6), and he offers to do good to us if we will embrace him as king and commit ourselves to his reign of peace.