

Reign In Your Emotions

From Second Samuel

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Bible Text: 2 Samuel 3:26-30

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Turn in your Bibles, please, to the book of 2 Samuel and the third chapter.

I remember several years ago, when I was still pastor in Sterling, Kansas, announcing the text before a sermon. It was a text from Deuteronomy. When I read the text, one of the elders leaned over and nudged his wife. I could see that he was saying to her, "I wonder what he will do that."

You may think the same thing as we look at this particular text this morning in 2 Samuel chapter three. The text is verses 26 through 30.

When Joab came out from David, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the well of Sirah; but David did not know it. So when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the middle of the gate to speak with him privately, and there he struck him in the belly so that he died on account of the blood of Asahel his brother. Afterward when David heard it, he said, "I and my kingdom are innocent before the LORD forever of the blood of Abner the son of Ner. May it fall on the head of Joab and on all his father's house; and may there not fail from the house of Joab one who has a discharge, or who is a leper, or who takes hold of a distaff, or who falls by the sword, or who lacks bread." So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner because he had put their brother Asahel to death in the battle at Gibeon.¹

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you, again, for your Word. And as we have occasion to look into this particular little story that comes to us in 2 Samuel chapter three, we pray that we might gain insight from it about you. In the end, Father, you are the main character in the Scriptures. And our desire is to know the lesson that you have for us from this, your Word. So be pleased to bless us now as we look into this particular text, we ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ 2 Samuel 3:26-30.

Probably about 35 years ago a young pastor entered his congregation. The congregation had already elected 12 men, 12 different men to either the office of elder or deacon. But these men refused to stand for ordination. They refused to stand for ordination because they could not accept the Westminster Confession of Faith, the standard for this particular church and this particular denomination. The pastor went around to speak to each of these candidates for office and to ask them to step aside. But one after the other they declined to step aside and to allow others to be elected.

And so the pastor, after some wrestling, filed charges against these men so that the church could move forward. After this process went ahead for a little bit, some of these men gathered together and filed charges against the pastor in Presbytery. Some of you are shaking your heads. Yes, it was a rather unseemly situation. What is a pastor to do in a circumstance like this? Well, one of the lessons, I think, a pastor ought to learn in such situations is that you have to reign in your emotions. You also have to acknowledge the fact that Christ will avenge evil and that Christ will build his church.

When you look at our text this morning, you see Joab killing this other man Abner. You see David rather standing by. I think you get the same lesson. At all times we have to learn to reign in our emotions. We must acknowledge the fact that Christ will, in due time, avenge evil because he is about building his Church. And so this is the lesson I want you to get this morning. Reign in your emotions; know that Christ avenges evil and is about building his Church. Reign in your emotions; know that Christ avenges evil and will build his Church.

When we enter our text this morning we have several characters before us. We have David, of course. Saul is now dead. David is now King of Judah. There is civil war taking place in the country. We have Ishbosheth. He is the King of the 11 tribes to the north while David has become King of Judah in the south. The situation reminds you of what happens later in the history of Israel. And then we have Joab, who is mentioned in our text. Joab is the commander of David's armies. He is a very competent general but he is a rascal. He is filled with vengeance and jealousy. Calvin numbers him among the unbelievers. And in the end I think he turns out to be a reprobate. So he is a rascal.

And then we have Abner. Abner is the commander of the armies of the 11 northern tribes. Abner is really the power behind the throne of Ishbosheth. Ishbosheth is one of the sons of Saul. But Abner has really instigated the whole procedure to put Ishbosheth on the throne. So Abner is the power behind the throne of the northern tribes, if you will.

And then we have another character that plays in our story, you see, in the 30th verse. "So Joab and Abishai his brother killed Abner because he had put their brother Asahel to death."² We have this other man Asahel. Earlier, in a battle as a part of the civil war that was taking place, he was killed by Abner. And so we have this festering jealousy and vengeful attitude in Joab because of the death of his brother Asahel at the hands of

² 2 Samuel 3:30.

Abner, the commander of Ishbosheth. And so this is really a story of some intrigue and subterfuge. There are emotions running very high as we enter this story.

So let's look now at verses 26 and 27. "When Joab came out from David, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the well of Sirah; but David did not know it."³ This is a secret encounter between Joab and Abner. "So when Abner returned to Hebron..."⁴ Hebron is a city which is south and east of Jerusalem a few miles. Later David takes the citadel of Jerusalem to make it his capital, but not yet. David is now in Hebron. This is his capital as he is the king of Judah. And so Joab's summons Abner to come down to Hebron.

"So when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the middle of the gate to speak with him privately."⁵ Here is this close encounter. "And there he struck him in the belly."⁶ A close encounter, for sure. We don't know what kind of instrument he used, but it very well could have been that Joab had a short sword or dagger or something of that sort. As he approaches Abner, they begin to talk. Abner is unaware that there is any danger. Joab strikes and plunges the instrument of death into his belly.

The King James Version says he "smote him there under the fifth rib." This is an interpretation of the Hebrew language at this point. However it may be, he strikes the death blow. And the text tells us, "So that he died on account of the blood of Asahel his brother."⁷

Now earlier, as I say, there was civil war. The armies of Abner and the armies of Joab were clashing with one another. Abner really instigated the fighting by saying to Joab as they meet, "Let's divide up 12 men each and we will have a little game here, a game of death."⁸ And Joab consents to the contest. You see, these men are blood thirsty individuals. As this contest becomes a battle, and the text tells us Asahel, who is swift of foot, takes off in pursuit of Abner. Abner warns, "No, no. Turn back, Asahel. Do you want to die?" And Asahel says, "No. I am going to take you down." And Abner turns around and rams the butt of his spear into the gut of Asahel. The text tells us Abner's spear comes out his back.⁹ Cinematographers have a way of portraying these kinds of things so that the individuals are not actually hurt. But we are deceived by the cinematographers. This is actually a deadly scene. And in the case of Asahel it was certainly deadly. This death was in combat, in war. But now in our story Joab has been festering with anger. He has been waiting for an opportunity to slay Abner and to avenge the death of his brother.

But there is another piece to the story. Let's go to 2 Samuel chapter three and verse 17.

³ 2 Samuel 3:26.

⁴ 2 Samuel 3:27.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See 2 Samuel 2:14-17.

⁹ See 2 Samuel 2:18-23.

Now Abner had consultation with the elders of Israel, saying, “In times past you were seeking for David to be king over you. Now then, do it! For the LORD has spoken of 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.’”¹⁰

So it seems that Abner comes over to the side of David. He has had a falling out with his own king. He has had a falling out with Ishbosheth. He is not a loyal servant at all.

Reading on now.

Abner also spoke in the hearing of Benjamin; and in addition Abner went to speak in the hearing of David in Hebron all that seemed good to Israel and to the whole house of Benjamin. Then Abner and twenty men with him came to David at Hebron. And David made a feast for Abner and the men who were with him. Abner said to David, “Let me arise and go and gather all Israel to my lord the king, that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may be king over all that your soul desires.” So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace.¹¹

So here comes Abner now, he makes peace with David because he has had a falling out with Ishbosheth. He is going to deliver the 11 tribes into the hand of David. Verse 22.

And behold, the servants of David and Joab came from a raid and brought much spoil with them; but Abner was not with David in Hebron, for he had sent him away, and he had gone in peace. When Joab and all the army that was with him arrived, they told Joab, saying, “Abner the son of Ner came to the king, and he has sent him away, and he has gone in peace.”¹²

“What is going on? Our enemy has come and made peace with David? This is an outrage.” This seems to be the posture of Joab and his men. Verse 24. “Then Joab came to the king and said, ‘What have you done?’”¹³ “David, what have you done?” You can imagine the emotions are running a little high here. “Then Joab came to the king and said, ‘What have you done? Behold, Abner came to you; why then have you sent him away and he is already gone?’”¹⁴ “Why did you not take care of our enemy as you should have?” we might add.

Verse 25. “You know Abner the son of Ner, that he came to deceive you and to learn of your going out and coming in and to find out all that you are doing.”¹⁵ “You know right

¹⁰ 2 Samuel 3:17-18.

¹¹ 2 Samuel 3:19-21.

¹² 2 Samuel 3:22-23.

¹³ 2 Samuel 3:24.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 2 Samuel 3:25.

well, David, that Abner did not come here with pure motives. He came here to find out your activities so that he could plunder our camp. What is wrong with you, David?"

And so Joab is not only upset with the fact that Abner killed his brother, he is also upset with the fact that Abner has made peace with David. And Joab is afraid that Abner might come in and undercut his status as the commander of David's armies. He is jealous. And with this jealous and vengeful spirit he calls Abner to come back to the gate of the city of Hebron and he kills him there inside the gate of the city of Hebron.

Now you ought to know something about Hebron. It was a city of refuge. It was one of those cities to which a murderer may flee for safety from one who might seek vengeance. Only if he would go outside of the city and was caught outside the city may the murderer be slain by one seeking to avenge a death.

And so Joab, knowing that Hebron is a city of refuge and thinking to himself that Abner had murdered his brother, does not even take heed to the law of God with regard to the city of refuge. He murders Abner there inside the gate of that city. Thus he exacerbates his crime. He is a despicable person in the end.

And what is David's reaction? Well, let's look at our text again in 2 Samuel three verse 28. "Afterward when David heard it, he said, 'I and my kingdom are innocent before the LORD forever of the blood of Abner the son of Ner.'"¹⁶ David had no idea what Joab was up to and so he declares his innocence and the innocence of his kingdom, that is Judah. David disavows the act of Joab.

And he goes a step further. "May it fall on the head of Joab and on all his father's house; and may there not fail from the house of Joab one who has a discharge, or who is a leper, or who takes hold of a distaff, or who falls by the sword, or who lacks bread."¹⁷ He levels a curse against Joab and his household. Now, I think David would never have done this if he did not realize what kind of a person Joab actually was. And the way Joab takes the life of Abner displays his defiance of the law of God. And so David levels this curse against Joab. Calvin makes an interesting comment here in one of his sermons. He says it was likely a mistake that David didn't go further and bring punishment against Joab.

But now, you know David. David is a man after God's own heart. David is a man, even with his flaws, who respects the law of God. He desires in his heart of hearts to follow God, to be the man that God wants him to be. And as you read the narratives about David, David is preeminently a man of patience. He is preeminently a man who waits, who waits on God's timing. He doesn't reach out and grasp the kingdom, but he waits for God to bring it to him, to give it to him. He is preeminently a man of patience. And so he disavows the act of Joab and he utters this curse and he lets the matter lie.

Let's fill out the story of Joab here. Turn with me, if you would, to 1 Kings the very first chapter. When we enter 1 Kings David is near death. The kingdom is to be transferred to

¹⁶ 2 Samuel 3:28.

¹⁷ 2 Samuel 3:29.

his son Solomon. This is the will of God. But there is palace intrigue and Joab is in the center of it. First Kings chapter one and verse five.

Now Adonijah the son of Haggith exalted himself, saying, “I will be king.” So he prepared for himself chariots and horsemen with fifty men to run before him. His father [that is, David] had never crossed him at any time by asking, “Why have you done so?” And he was also a very handsome man, and he was born after Absalom.¹⁸

Absalom, you will recall, was also a very handsome man. And so this Adonijah feels that he will take the kingdom now as David passes from the scene. Verse seven.

He had conferred with Joab the son of Zeruah and with Abiathar the priest; and following Adonijah they helped him. But Zadok the priest, Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, Nathan the prophet, Shimei, Rei, and the mighty men who belonged to David, were not with Adonijah.¹⁹

And so Joab now is opposed to David. He links up with Adonijah. He thinks to himself, “Adonijah will be king and I will be his commander.” But it was not to be so.

Look, if you would now, at chapter two in 1 Kings and verse 27. Here is the action of Solomon. “So Solomon dismissed Abiathar from being priest to the LORD,”²⁰ because Abiathar had formed an alliance with Adonijah. But now Solomon is king. “So Solomon dismissed Abiathar from being priest to the LORD, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD, which He had spoken concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh.”²¹ God’s providences grind slowly, but they grind very fine.

Verse 28. “Now the news came to Joab, for Joab had followed Adonijah, although he had not followed Absalom. And Joab fled to the tent of the LORD and took hold of the horns of the altar.”²² Joab knew his life was in jeopardy and so he flees to the tabernacle and he grasps the horns of the altar as though to say, “God, will save me.” No, not as an unbeliever, not as one who defies the law of God. You come into the tabernacle and grasp the very horns of the altar and think that God will save you?

Verse 29.

It was told King Solomon that Joab had fled to the tent of the LORD, and behold, he is beside the altar. Then Solomon sent Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, saying, “Go, fall upon him.” So Benaiah came to the tent of the LORD and said to him, “Thus the king has said, ‘Come out.’” But he said, “No, for I will die here.” And Benaiah brought the king word again,

¹⁸ 1 Kings 1:5-6.

¹⁹ 1 Kings 1:7-8.

²⁰ 1 Kings 2:27.

²¹ Ibid.

²² 1 Kings 2:28.

saying, “Thus spoke Joab, and thus he answered me.” The king said to him, “Do as he has spoken and fall upon him and bury him, that you may remove from me and from my father’s house the blood which Joab shed without cause.”²³

Now this is at the end of the reign of David and the beginning of the reign of Solomon. And how many years did David reign? Forty years, seven and a half years in Hebron and then the remainder as king over the entire nation. For 40 years, nearly 40 years, David let this situation lie. Joab would find his end appropriately in the providence of God. Evil will be avenged. God is building his kingdom. David is patient, you see.

Verse 32.

The LORD will return his blood on his own head, because he fell upon two men more righteous and better than he and killed them with the sword, while my father David did not know it: Abner the son of Ner, commander of the army of Israel, and Amasa the son of Jether, commander of the army of Judah.²⁴

Significantly enough this Amasa was made the commander of the armies under Absalom, under Absalom’s revolt. Although he had been David’s general, Joab didn’t like this. He didn’t like being set out to pasture and so he also killed this Amasa. He was a despicable person. Verse 33 says, “So shall their blood return on the head of Joab and on the head of his descendants forever; but to David and his descendants and his house and his throne, may there be peace from the LORD forever.”²⁵

And so there is, in large measure, our lesson. Joab is hot with passion. David is patient. He has God’s perspective. He knows God will give him the kingdom. Reign in, reign in those emotions. Christ will avenge evil. Christ is building his kingdom.

Now I left a character out of the story. I mentioned this in prayer at the outset. As you go back to 2 Samuel chapter three verses 26 and 27 particularly:

When Joab came out from David, he sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the well of Sirah; but David did not know it. So when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the middle of the gate to speak with him privately, and there he struck him in the belly so that he died on account of the blood of Asahel his brother.²⁶

Why do we have this story? God gives us this story. The main character in the Bible is God. And you may wonder about a story like this. I wonder about a story like this. What do we learn from a story like this? Well, in order to learn something from a story like

²³ 1 Kings 2:29-31.

²⁴ 1 Kings 2:32.

²⁵ 1 Kings 2:33.

²⁶ 2 Samuel 3:26-27.

this you have to get up off the printed page. You have to get out of the horizontal plane and you have to get up to the position of the one who is giving the story. God is giving us this story and God is in a position to know the beginning and the end of the story.

And this little piece that we have been looking at in 2 Samuel chapter three is like a little puzzle piece in a 10,000 piece puzzle. You pick up that piece and you wonder, now, where does it go? How is it connected? And when you finally get the pieces of the puzzle put together you can see where each one of those individual pieces fits and how they are connected. And so you have to get up above the story, don't you, you have to get up above the story and get some perspective. You need divine perspective. And this is part of our problem. When we read stories like this we stay down on the horizontal level and we are concerned mostly about the relationships between David and Abner and Joab.

Not too long ago my wife and I attended a sabbath school class in which there was a study of David. Toward the end of each class that we attended the elder leading the class asked this question: So what is the moral of the story? And we would go home shaking our heads because the study guide was taking the class in an entirely different direction. The study guide was up above each story, in the position of God, surveying the terrain and looking at how God was slowly, inexorably, patiently giving David the kingdom and putting all of David's enemies under his feet. Slowly, surely this was coming about.

You see, the whole story is really about how David, as I said, slowly, inexorably becomes a great king who typifies Jesus Christ, The Great King. And we see how God patiently brings all of David's enemies under his authority. In our age we are experiencing this. Christ is making all of his enemies a footstool for his feet.²⁷ And there we have the lesson again. Reign in those emotions. Christ will avenge evil. He is building his kingdom. This is what it is about when we get a little bit of the whole story, a little sliver of the story here in 2 Samuel that fits into the big mosaic.

I began by telling you a story about a pastor. I was the pastor. And one of the lessons I had to learn when men brought false charges against me to Presbytery was that I had to button up. I had to reign in my emotions. I had to let others carry the water in my defense because I couldn't do it myself. Christ was building his Church. Christ was building his kingdom and he was about avenging evil at the same time. And this is part of the lesson we learn in this little sliver of Old Testament history.

At synod this year on a Thursday evening and Friday morning there was heated debate. And in God's providence my duty was to moderate that part of the meeting. And I shut down some debate because of heated and inappropriate emotions. At a recess I was rebuked by one of the brothers who said to me very emotionally. "You need to let those people speak." I responded, "Within limits."

And then after the meeting I had one of the older ministers come to me and ask, "What did we accomplish? I think the devil has had free reign here." He was emotional. And

²⁷ See Psalm 110:1, Acts 2:35, Hebrews 1:13 and 10:13.

then the following Lord's Day I spoke to another retired minister. I said, "How are you today?" His head fell. He said, "I am despondent." I said, "Why?" And he went back to that same debate. Emotions were churning in his heart.

And then I come to this text in 2 Samuel chapter three. Joab is full of anger. He is full of vengeance. He is full of jealousy. And there is David. He is not without his faults. But he exercises great patience knowing that God, in his time, will deliver him the kingdom. And there is the lesson, from God's perspective.

And so my friends, reign in those emotions. Remember, Christ will avenge evil. He is building his Church. And it doesn't matter if the situation in which the emotions are raw is in the family, in the Church, in the office, or in some other situation. You need to remember God is the main character in your story. You need to reign in those emotions; Christ will avenge evil and he will build his church.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you. You are the King and the Lord of all. We are feeble. We sin much. We let these emotions of ours too often get out of control. Forgive us. Call us to remember that in due time you will avenge evil. You are building your church. This is our faith. This is our trust. Grant that in the heat of emotional turmoil we might be reminded that this is the case and not fret because of evil doers, but live patiently under your providential care knowing your goodness for us. So be pleased to bless us we pray in the good name of Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.