

Part 21

2 Samuel 2:8–4:12

David Watches and Waits

1. Abner the kingmaker (2 Sam. 2:8–32)

The key actor in this drama was Abner, Saul's cousin and the commander of his army (1 Sam. 14:50). It was Abner who brought David to Saul after David killed Goliath (17:55–58) and who with Saul pursued David for ten years (26:5ff). Abner was rebuked and humiliated by David when he failed to protect the king (26:13–16) and Abner had no special love for David.

The people of Israel honored David above Saul and eventually the nation would learn that David was God's choice as king of Israel. But David already had a commander, Joab, so when David became king, what would happen to Abner? Most of what Abner did during those seven and a half years wasn't for the glory of God or the strengthening of Israel, but for his own self-interest. He was taking care of number one.

Abner rejects David's kingship (vv. 8–11). The people of Judah obeyed God's will and anointed David as their king, but Abner disobeyed the Lord and made Saul's one remaining son, Ish-Bosheth, the king of "all Israel." Abner knew that David was God's choice, a gifted leader and a brave soldier, but he deliberately rebelled against the Lord and appointed Ish-Bosheth. Israel had asked for a king "like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5), and when a king died, the other nations appointed a king's eldest son to succeed him. Three of Saul's sons had died in battle, and Ish-Bosheth was all that remained of the royal family.

Scripture doesn't say much about Ish-Bosheth, but it's clear that he was a weak puppet ruler manipulated by Abner (3:11; 4:1). He was certainly old enough to fight in the army with his father and brothers, but Saul left him home to protect the dynasty. (He was probably also a weak soldier.) Saul and Abner both knew that God had taken the dynasty away from Saul (1 Sam. 13:11–14). Knowing that he and his sons would die in the battle, Saul probably arranged to make his fourth son king. Ish-Bosheth may have been crowned by the general, but he was never anointed by the Lord.

Abner took Ish-Bosheth to Mahanaim, on the east side of the Jordan. This was a Levitical city of refuge where he would be safe (Josh. 21:38), and there Abner established a capital for "all Israel." But it's likely that it took at least five years for Abner to persuade the tribes (minus Judah) to follow their new king. Ish-Bosheth was crowned at the beginning of David's reign of seven years and six months and was assassinated after reigning only two years over "all Israel." This would have been the last two years of David's reign in Hebron. Ish-Bosheth didn't have a long reign over "all Israel," but everybody knew that Abner was in charge anyway.

There's a modern touch to this scenario, for our political and religious worlds are populated by these same three kinds of people. We have weak people like Ish-Bosheth, who get where they are because they have "connections." We have strong, selfish people like Abner, who know how to manipulate others for their own personal profit. We also have people of God like David who are called, anointed, and equipped but must wait for God's time before they can serve. During more than fifty years of ministry, I have seen churches and other ministries bypass God's chosen men and women and put unqualified people into places of leadership just because they were well-known or had "connections."

Abner got what he wanted, but within a few years, he lost it all.

Abner challenges David's army (vv. 12–17). When Abner made Ish-Bosheth king, he was actually declaring war on David, and he knew it. But by now Abner had all the tribes except Judah behind him and he felt he could easily defeat David in battle and take over the entire kingdom. Confident of

victory, Abner called for a contest between the two armies, to be held at the great cistern about twenty-three miles north of Gibeon. This was not unlike the challenge Goliath issued when he called for one of Saul's soldiers to fight him (1 Sam. 17:8–10). But Abner was rebelling against God while David was God's chosen leader!

This is the first time we meet Joab, David's nephew and the commander of his army. The two armies met at the reservoir, and twelve soldiers from the army of Benjamin faced twelve men from Judah—and all twenty-four men were killed! That day the battlefield received a new name—"the field of sharp edges" or "the field of daggers." Joab and Abner wasted no time getting their troops in battle formation, and "The battle that day was very fierce." Abner was defeated that day, a portent of things to come.

Abner kills David's nephew (vv. 18–23). Joab, Abishai, and Asahel were David's nephews, the sons of his sister Zeruah (see 1 Chron. 2:13–16). Whether on his own initiative or at his brother's orders, Asahel went after Abner, for he knew that slaying the enemy general could mean confusing and scattering the whole enemy army. If Joab commanded the fleet-footed young man to go after Abner, perhaps he was thinking of his own future, for Abner might threaten to take his position as head of the army.

The record makes it clear that Abner had no desire to harm or kill the lad, but Asahel was persistent.

First Abner told him to turn aside and take what he wanted from one of the dead enemy soldiers.

Then he warned Asahel that if he killed him, this would create a "blood feud" that could cause trouble for years to come. Abner knew Joab and had no desire to begin a possible lifelong family conflict. It was bad enough that Joab and Abner were rival generals. When Asahel refused to give up the chase, the clever Abner killed him by using one of the oldest tricks of the battlefield: he stopped suddenly and allowed Asahel to propel himself right into the end of spear. The butt end of a spear was often sharpened so the spear could be thrust into the ground and be ready for action (1 Sam. 26:7). Asahel fell to the ground and died. Asahel died in the course of battle, even though it appears that Abner had no plans or even desire to kill him.

Abner calls for a truce (vv. 25–32). Asahel's two brothers, Joab and Abishai, must have been following close behind because they took up the pursuit of Abner, no doubt determined to avenge the blood of their brother. But Abner's troops rescued him, and he and the Benjamites retreated to the hill of Ammah. Abner knew he was beaten (vv. 30–31), so he called for a truce. He may have suspected that the death of Asahel would encourage Joab and Abishai to stop fighting and take care of burial. Judah and Benjamin were brothers, both sons of Jacob, and why should brother fight brother? But it was Abner who had initiated the battle, so he had only himself to blame. A scheming man, he had a plan in mind that would give him both armies without having to shed blood.

Joab knew the heart of David, that he wanted unity and peace, not division and war, so he blew the trumpet and stopped his troops from pursuing the enemy. He said to Abner, "God only knows what would have happened if you hadn't spoken, for we would have chased you all night if necessary" (v. 27 NLT). Abner and his men walked all night to return to Mahanaim, and Joab and his army returned to Hebron, stopping at Bethlehem along the way to give Asahel a proper burial. During that all-night march, Joab and Abishai hatched a plot to avenge the death of their brother.

2. Abner the negotiator (2 Sam. 3:1–21)

The phrase "a long war" (vv. 1, 6) suggests a state of hostility for two years, occasional clashes rather than one long battle after another. David was biding his time, knowing that God would keep His promises and give him the throne of Israel. David's government in Hebron was going from strength to

strength (Ps. 84:7), while the alliance of tribes under Ish-Bosheth and Abner was getting weaker. However, the astute Abner was using his position in the house of Saul to strengthen his own authority, for he was getting ready to make David an offer the king couldn't resist (v. 6).

As for David, his family was also increasing (see also 1 Chron. 3:1–4), and the king now had a growing harem like any other eastern monarch. Of course, David's son Solomon would go far beyond what his father had done or what any Jewish king would do (1 Kings 11:3). David had moved to Hebron with two wives, and now he had six sons by six different wives. Polygamy started with Lamech, a descendant of Cain (Gen. 4:19), and was tolerated in Israel; but it was forbidden to Israel's kings (Deut. 17:17).

Amnon, David's firstborn, would rape his half-sister Tamar (chap. 13) and be murdered by Tamar's full brother Absalom, who would be killed while trying to take the kingdom from his father (chap. 14–18). The fact that Absalom was related to royalty on his mother's side might have encouraged his crusade for the kingdom. No doubt David's marriage to Maacah was politically motivated so that David would have an ally near Ish-Bosheth. Chileab is called Daniel in 1 Chronicles 4:1. During David's final illness, Adonijah would try to capture the throne and would be executed by Solomon (1 Kings 1–2). We know nothing about Shephatiah and his mother Abitai, and Ithream and his mother Eglah. After relocating his capital in Jerusalem, David took even more wives and concubines and had eleven more sons born to him (5:13–16).

Abner defects to David (vv. 6–11). Abner was a pragmatic politician as well as a shrewd general, and his basic principle was, "Always join the winning side." When he perceived that the throne of Ish-Bosheth had no future, he decided to switch loyalties and thereby guarantee his own security and possibly save lives. David had a reputation for kindness, and he had shown remarkable patience with the house of Saul.

We aren't told that Abner actually had intercourse with Saul's concubine Rizpah, and he firmly denied it; but if he did, he committed a very serious offense. A deceased king's harem belonged to his successor, in this case, Ish-Bosheth (see 12:8 and 16:15–23), and any man who even asked for one of those women was asking for the kingdom and guilty of treason. This is what led to the death of Adonijah (1 Kings 2:13–25). It's possible that Abner did take Rizpah just to precipitate a quarrel with Ish-Bosheth and to declare his change of allegiance. If so, he succeeded. Of course, the king wasn't strong enough to oppose Abner, who now announced that he was on David's side. The phrase "throne of David" is used in verse 10 for the first time in Scripture, and as time passes, it will take on Messianic significance (Isa. 9:6–7).

Abner negotiates for David (vv. 12–21). This episode is a good example of ancient "shuttle diplomacy."

- Abner sent messengers to David offering to bring all Israel under his rule (v. 12).
- David sent messengers to Abner accepting his offer, provided Abner first sent Michal to him. She was David's wife and Ish-Bosheth's sister (v. 13).
- Abner told Ish-Bosheth to honor David's request, and David also sent Ish-Bosheth a message asking that Michal be sent to Hebron (v. 14).
- Abner conferred with the elders of Israel (vv. 17–18).
- Abner conferred with the leaders of Benjamin (v. 19).
- Abner and twenty representatives from the tribes came to Hebron, bringing Michal with them (vv. 15–16, 20).
- Abner and David agreed on how to transfer the kingdom, and they shared a feast and made a covenant (v. 21).

In the early stages of these negotiations it would have been dangerous and unwise for David and Abner to meet personally, so they depended on their officials to make the necessary contacts. David had no reason not to cooperate with Abner since he had never personally been at war with him or King Saul. Outright war was the only alternative to this kind of diplomacy, and David was a man of peace. David had married into Saul's family, so he had to show some respect both to Abner and Ish-Bosheth, and he was determined to unite the tribes as quickly as possible and with the least amount of bloodshed. He had waited over seven years, and it was time to act.

Why did David make the return of Michal a condition for further negotiation? First of all, she was still his wife, even though Saul had given her to another man. Ten years before, when they were wed, Michal loved David very much (1 Sam. 18:20), and we have reason to believe that David loved her. It was good diplomacy to invite his "queen" to join with him, and the fact that she came from the house of Saul helped to strengthen the bonds of unity. By claiming the daughter of Saul, David was also claiming all the kingdom; and when Abner brought Michal to Hebron, it was a public announcement that he had broken with the house of Saul and was now allied with David.

3. Abner the victim (2 Sam. 3:22–39)

It looked as though everything was in good order for a peaceful transition, but there were hidden land mines in the diplomatic field and they were ready to explode. Ish-Bosheth was still on the throne and David would have to deal with him and the loyal supporters of the house of Saul. Abner had killed Asahel, and Joab was biding his time until he could avenge his brother's death.

Joab reproaches David (vv. 22–25). David had sent Joab and some of his men on a raid to secure wealth to help support the kingdom. On his return, when Joab heard that David had received Abner and given him a feast, his anger erupted and he rebuked the king. The key idea in this paragraph is that Saul's general and the man who killed young Asahel had come and gone "in peace" (vv. 21–23), and Joab couldn't understand it. His own heart was still pained at the death of his brother, and Joab couldn't understand his sovereign's policies. Of course, Joab was protecting his own job just as Abner was protecting his, but unlike David, Joab didn't have any faith in what Abner said or did. Joab was certain that Abner's visit had nothing to do with turning the kingdom over to David. The wily general was only spying out the situation and getting ready for an attack.

The text records no reply from David. Joab had never been easy to deal with (3:39), and the fact that he was a relative made the situation even more difficult. The dynamics of David's family—the multiplied wives, the many children and various relatives in places of authority—created endless problems for the king, and they weren't easy to solve. David's silence wasn't that of agreement, because he didn't agree with his general; it was the silence of restraint and the evidence of a deep desire to put the nation back together again. David wasn't promoting "peace at any price," because he was a man of integrity; but he wasn't prepared to let his impetuous general conduct a personal vendetta in the name of the king. The sentiments of Psalm 120 could certainly apply to David's situation at this time.

Joab deceives Abner and kills him (vv. 26–27). Joab accused Abner of being a liar (v. 25) but practiced deception himself! We're often guilty of the sins we say others commit, and "it takes a thief to catch a thief." Joab must have sent the messengers in the name of the king or Abner would have been more cautious. Abner hadn't seen Joab at the king's house, so he probably assumed that David's general was still away on his raiding expedition. Joab and his brother Abishai (v. 30) were waiting for Abner, took him to a secluded part of the city gate, and stabbed him under the fifth rib, the same place he had stabbed Asahel (2:23).

Everything about the death of Abner was wrong. The two brothers knew what their king wanted, yet they deliberately put their own interests ahead of that of the kingdom. Asahel had been pursuing Abner on the battlefield, so he was another casualty of war; but the death of Abner was murder.

Hebron was a city of refuge, a sanctuary where an accused murderer could get a fair trial, but the two brothers never gave the elders in Hebron a chance to hear the case. Abner killed Asahel in self-defense; but when Joab and Abishai killed Abner, it was pure revenge, and Abner never had an opportunity to defend himself. Asahel's death occurred in broad daylight where everybody could witness what happened, but Abner was deceived and led into the shadows. Abishai had accompanied David into Saul's camp and had seen him refuse to kill his father-in-law (1 Sam. 26:6ff), so he knew that David would never countenance the murder of Saul's general. We wonder if Abner died thinking that David had been involved in the plot to kill him.

David honors Abner (vv. 28–39). When David heard the news of Abner's death, he immediately disclaimed any part in what his two nephews had done. In fact, he went so far as to call down a curse on the house of Joab, naming some of the plagues that Moses had warned about in the Covenant (Deut. 28:25–29, 58–62). David issued a royal edict that commanded Joab and his army to mourn over Abner and to attend his funeral. The phrase "all the people" is used seven times in vv. 31–37 (KJV) and refers to the men in Joab's army (2:28; 12:29). David commanded them all to tear their garments, put on sackcloth, and weep over the death of a great man, and David himself followed the bier to the place of interment. Because Joab and Abishai were among the official mourners, it's likely that many of the people didn't know that they were the murderers. David didn't call them to trial, and it's likely that his statements in verses 29 and 39 were spoken privately to his inner council. He tried to shield them as much as possible, although they certainly didn't deserve it.

As he did for Saul and Jonathan, David wrote an official elegy to honor the dead general (vv. 33–34, 38). He made it clear that Abner hadn't died because of some foolish act on his part, and he had never been a prisoner at any time in his military career. He had fallen before wicked men who had deceived him. David further honored Abner by burying him in the royal city of Hebron and not taking him back to Benjamin. Later, David said to his confidential servants that Abner was "a prince and a great man." David also appointed Abner's son Jaasiel as chief officer over the tribe of Benjamin.

David's lament for himself in verse 39 was heard by his select "inner circle" and expressed the problems David had with his own family. The word "weak" doesn't suggest that David was not strong enough to be king, but rather that he was "restrained and gentle" in contrast to the "hard" approach of his nephews. David had experienced God's gentleness (22:36), and he tried to deal with others as God had dealt with him. He no doubt went too far in this approach when it came to his own family (18:5, 14), but David was a man after God's own heart (Ps. 103:8–14). All David could do was leave the judgment with the Lord, for He never makes a mistake.

4. Ish-Bosheth the loser (2 Sam. 4:1–12)

If David thought he was weak because of the behavior of his nephews, he should have considered the situation of Ish-Bosheth following the death of Abner. David was at least a great warrior and a gifted leader, while Ish-Bosheth was a mere puppet in the hands of his general, and now the general was dead. The people of the tribes in his kingdom knew that Abner's death meant the end of the reign of their king, and they no doubt expected a swift invasion by David and his army. The common people knew nothing of David's intentions or of his recent meeting with Abner. It was a day of distress for Ish-Bosheth and his people.

The account of Baanah and Rechab reminds us of the Amalekite in 2 Samuel 1, the man who claimed he killed Saul. These two men were minor officers in Abner's army who thought they could earn rewards and promotion from David if they killed Ish-Bosheth, and like the Amalekite, they were wrong. The only living heir to Saul's throne was a crippled twelve-year-old boy named Mephibosheth, so if Baanah and Rechab killed the king, the way would be open for David to gain the throne and unite the nation. (We will meet Mephibosheth again in 9:1–13; 16:1–4; 19:24–30; and 21:7–8.)

Their excuse for entering the king's house was to secure grain for their men, and while the king was asleep and unprotected, they killed him. If the murder of Abner was a heinous crime, this murder was even worse; for the man's only "crime" was that he was the son of Saul! He had broken no law and injured no person, and he wasn't given opportunity to defend himself. His murderers didn't even show respect to his dead body, for they beheaded him so they could take the evidence to David and receive their reward. Even worse, the two murderers told David that the Lord had avenged him!

David's answer made it clear that at no time in his career had he ever broken God's commandment by murdering somebody in order to accomplish his purposes. The Lord had watched over him and protected him during ten years of exile and now more than seven years as king in Hebron. As when Saul and Abner died, David made it very clear that he was not involved in any way. It would have been very easy for David's enemies to start slanderous rumors that the king had engineered both deaths in order to clear the way for ascending the throne of Israel.

At the king's command, his guards killed the two confessed murderers, cut off their hands and feet, and hung their corpses up as evidence of the king's justice. To mutilate a corpse in this way and then expose it publicly was the ultimate in humiliation (Deut. 21:22–23). David had the head of Ish-Bosheth buried in Hebron in the sepulchre of Abner, for they were relatives.

The four "kings" that Paul wrote about in Romans 5 were certainly active in these scenes from David's life. Sin was reigning (5:21) as men lied to each other, hated each other, and sought to destroy each other. Death also reigned (5:14, 17) as Asahel, Abner, and Ish-Bosheth were slain, along with nearly four hundred soldiers who died at the battle of the pool of Gibeon. But God's grace also reigned (5:21), for He protected David and overruled men's sins to accomplish His divine purposes. "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (5:20 KJV). But David "reigned in life" (5:17) and let God control him as he faced one emergency after another. He was a man empowered by God, and God brought him through each crisis and helped him to succeed.

In the midst of today's troubles and trials, God's people can "reign in life by Jesus Christ" if we will surrender to Him, wait on Him, and trust His promises