**David Anointed King Over Judah**

2 Samuel 2:1-32 Key Verse 2:4

*“Then the men of Judah came to Hebron, and there they anointed David king over the tribe of Judah.”*

Today we see David’s first steps toward kingship after the death of Saul. David didn’t become king of all Israel immediately. David does his best to unite Israel peacefully, but as we’ll see in coming weeks that there were years of bitter war between the armies of Saul and of David. Mostly what we will learn from that is how seeking revenge only leads to more death and bitterness. But we’ll also see examples of godly wisdom, especially from David who had been trained by God through his years on the run. David’s time of waiting and being trained is not over yet. Let’s pray we may learn how God works when there is a time of waiting on his promise. The message has three parts.

I. David’s first acts as king (1-7)

In Chapter 1, we saw that David and his soldiers and their families were still in Ziklag, the Philistine city given to him by Achish, when he heard the news that Saul and Jonathan had been killed. Now, it seems, the time has come to fulfill what God promised David many years before, when Samuel anointed him to be king of Israel. Now that Saul was dead, David could think, “now is the time for me to march back to Israel and take my rightful throne and demand everyone acknowledge me as king.” But that is not what David does. Look at verse 1. *“In the course of time, David inquired of the Lord. ‘Shall I go up to one of the towns of Judah?’ he asked.”* David did not presume that it was immediately time for him to become king of Israel, but he humbly sought God’s leading. He thought he should first go to a town of his own tribe of Judah. The Lord agreed with this and said “Go up.” Then David inquired again as to which town in Judah he should go to, and the Lord answered “to Hebron.”

Why Hebron? Hebron was an ancient city; Abraham lived near it for a time, and his wife Sarah died and was buried near there. Later, when the Israelites conquered the Promised Land under Joshua, Joshua gave the city of Hebron to Caleb and his family. In David’s time, Hebron was one of the larger cities of Judah, definitely larger than David’s little hometown of Bethlehem. Hebron was centrally located within Judah’s territory and not too close to the territory of Benjamin, and so it could serve as a good capital city for now. So, verses 2 and 3 tell us that David and his wives and the men with him and their families all picked up and moved to Hebron and settled there and in its surrounding towns.

Here David gives us a good example of how we should prayerfully seek God’s will even when it seems obvious. Even when God opens a door that we have been waiting to go through, we should not just take it for granted that it’s time for us to charge ahead. David didn’t sit down and do nothing, but he sought God’s will and was ready to move when he understood what it was.

I remember when we were praying to purchase a Bible house for DuPage UBF after several years of worshiping in a classroom on the CoD campus. We looked at several buildings. One building was a great deal but it was so big that the maintenance would have been too much for us to handle. I remember looking at at least one other building as well, and there were probably others that I didn’t see. The process moved quite slowly, but we knew that a big part of discerning God’s leading is being patient. Finally, God showed us this building, and not only that, but he sent us Rob who had so much practical knowledge and ability to make a plan for how to remodel the place and get it approved by the city. And he carried out that plan, and here we are. Thank God for helping our leadership team discern his best leading.

Another thing we can notice here is that when David moved to Hebron, he took all the men and families who were with him in Ziklag. Even though David might think he was moving on to bigger and better things, he still kept his responsibility for the families with him. He looks like a shepherd with his flock.

What was the result of David moving to Hebron? Look at verse 4. *“Then the men of Judah came to Hebron, and there they anointed David king over the tribe of Judah.”* Do you remember how David served the people of Judah even while he was on the run? He protected Nabal’s sheep from raiders. He rescued the city of Keilah. He sent gifts to the elders of Judah from the spoils he got raiding other places. Those good deeds were not rewarded at the time David did them. But some people remembered, and now the good David did is beginning to come back to him. So in Hebron, David receives his first crown—not the crown on kingship over all Israel, but just over his own tribe of Judah. This shows how God was working step by step to grow David’s responsibility so he could always handle it well.

Now that David is a king, what will he do? Often, the first thing worldly kings do when they obtain power is think about who they can get revenge on. But what David does is the opposite of that. The first act recorded here of David as king is so meaningful. Look at verses 4b-7. *“When David was told that it was the men from Jabesh Gilead who had buried Saul,* *5 he sent messengers to them to say to them, ‘The Lord bless you for showing this kindness to Saul your master by burying him.* *6 May the Lord now show you kindness and faithfulness, and I too will show you the same favor because you have done this.* *7 Now then, be strong and brave, for Saul your master is dead, and the people of Judah have anointed me king over them.’”*

Even though Saul pursued David to kill him for many years, David’s first act as king was to honor the people who risked their lives to rescue Saul’s body. By doing this, David showed that he had no ill will toward the people who served Saul as their king. Rather, he praised their faithfulness. We know David himself had no such ill will toward Saul, but always called him “The Lord’s anointed” and wouldn’t do anything against Saul even when he had the chance.

David’s honoring the people of Jabesh-Gilead shows everyone that he is not going to use his kingly power to persecute the people who served Saul; the servants of Saul had no need to fear any vendetta from David. Note that the people of Jabesh-Gilead were not even of the tribe of Judah; That city was on the east side of the Jordan river, in the territory of the tribe of Gad. David’s gesture worked powerfully toward reunifying and healing the wounded nation of Israel. It is a kingly act in the best sense of that term.

Here we see that God’s leading on David’s life has raised him to be a king after his own heart. May God continue to lead us also so that we use the power and responsibility he gives us for good, showing a different spirit from the spirit of this world.

II. The war begins (8-23a)

How could David become king of all Israel, fulfilling God’s promise that came through Samuel’s anointing many years ago? In fact, it wouldn’t be easy. It would take a long time for the earthly reality to match God’s vision. Practically, the main obstacle that remained to David’s becoming king of all Israel was the Benjamites who had served under Saul, the most powerful of whom was Abner, the commander of Saul’s army. Now we see the actions that Abner takes after the death of Saul. Look at verses 8 and 9. *“Meanwhile, Abner son of Ner, the commander of Saul’s army, had taken Ish-Bosheth son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim.* *9 He made him king over Gilead, Ashuri and Jezreel, and also over Ephraim, Benjamin and all Israel.”* Strangely, it seems that Ish-Bosheth had no initiative to make himself king, even though he was Saul’s son, but it was all Abner’s doing. Clearly, this was not God’s will. If Abner had had faith, he could have recognized and acknowledged God’s anointing on David, as Abner heard Saul himself confess when he was in his right mind. But Abner did not seek God, but acted presumptuously as a way to keep his own power as commander, and the rest of Israel went along with that.

Look at verse 10. *“**Ish-Bosheth son of Saul was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he reigned two years. The tribe of Judah, however, remained loyal to David.”* There are now two conflicting claims to power in Israel—the throne of David in Judah, and the throne of Ish-Bosheth in Mahanaim. Saul’s men would claim that Judah had no right to set up their own king in Hebron, and David’s men would claim that Benjamin had no right to set up Saul’s son as king, because the judge Samuel (who anointed Saul in the first place) had now anointed David as Israel’s next king. It seems inevitable that this situation will break out into bloody conflict.

Look at verses 12 and 13. *“**Abner son of Ner, together with the men of Ish-Bosheth son of Saul, left Mahanaim and went to Gibeon.* *13 Joab son of Zeruiah and David’s men went out and met them at the pool of Gibeon. One group sat down on one side of the pool and one group on the other side.”* Joab was the commander of David’s army, and he and his men met Abner and his men at a location in Gibeon. At first, it looks like the leaders of both sides are gathering to try to find a diplomatic solution. Many of these men knew each other well, from the time when David and his men had served under Saul; many of them would even have fought side-by-side. But now, tensions are high as the two groups face off on opposite sides of the pool. I bet there were many distrustful, squinty-eyed expressions being made across the water.

At this point, Abner makes a suggestion. He says each side should select a number of young soldiers to fight hand-to-hand in front of everyone (14). This is definitely not a diplomatic solution, but Abner seems to want to resolve the conflict through a small-scale contest so at least everybody doesn’t have to try to kill everybody. It’s not clear if they ever actually agreed on terms of what to do based on the outcome of this match. But anyway, twelve men are counted off on each side, and how does the battle go? Look at verse 16. *“**Then each man grabbed his opponent by the head and thrust his dagger into his opponent’s side, and they fell down together. So that place in Gibeon was called Helkath Hazzurim.”* Wow. These must have been the most skillful and experienced warriors; each one of them went immediately for the killing blow, and all twelve men on each side were killed at the same time. So no resolution came from this match, only 24 men needlessly killed.

Then, despite Abner’s intentions, the conflict erupted into a full-scale battle. Verse 17 says, *“**The battle that day was very fierce, and Abner and the Israelites were defeated by David’s men.”* Trying to solve the problem with “just a little” violence was not going to work here; bloodshed always begets more bloodshed. This meeting at the pool of Gibeon became the official beginning of a bitter civil war that would stretch on for years.

This chapter also shows us an episode that became the start of a very bitter personal feud between Joab and Abner. Verse 18 tells us that Joab had two brothers who were at Gibeon with him: Abishai and Asahel. They were all among David’s mighty men. Asahel, we learn, was the fast one; verse 18 says he was “as fleet-footed as a wild gazelle.” Asahel got the idea that, with his speed, he could chase down Abner himself and take out the head of the opposing army. But this was a very foolish idea.

When Abner realized he was being chased by Asahel, he tried to reason with him, because they knew each other. In verse 21 he tells him, *“**Turn aside to the right or to the left; take on one of the young men and strip him of his weapons.”* It means that Asahel would be smart to pick a smaller target for his bloodlust and have success and take home some nice prizes, maybe a shiny new sword. But Asahel would not stop chasing Abner.

Then Abner warned Asahel again that he was able to strike him down, but he didn’t want to because killing each other would not solve anything but just make this conflict turn even more personal and ugly. Abner says, “How could I look your brother Joab in the face?” But Asahel was in the grip of his fixed idea and nothing could change his mind. So, as Asahel caught up to him, Abner was running holding his spear with the point pointing forward. But with one skillful move, Abner could stop, grasp the spear with both hands, and thrust butt of it backwards, and because Asahel was running so fast...it was very gruesome. Asahel died on the spot.

Let’s think about what we should learn from Asahel. Asahel had a God-given gift, but he let his gift make him prideful. He imagined that he could singlehandedly solve everything and take all the glory for himself by killing the leader. His ambition became a fixed idea in his mind, and he was unable to listen to any reasonable advice, and finally he lost his life. Ironically, his gift of speed actually contributed to his demise when he used it foolishly.

Have you ever been like Asahel? I have. Sometimes, when I get angry at someone, I become self-righteous and think up a big speech to give them to straighten them out. I often compose such speeches in the shower. But when I actually come face-to-face with the person, I feel the Holy Spirit holding me back. I realize that to say what I planned to say would really just be an ugly personal attack that would solve nothing and just create bitterness.

So let’s not become too proud of what we think our gift can accomplish. There is the gift of running, but there is also the gift of spearmanship. In the church, there are gifts of teaching, of listening, showing compassion, inviting, managing, cooking, cleaning, groundskeeping, scholarship, music, art, technology. No one gift can do everything, so we have to listen to the Holy Spirit and work together.

III. The battle is paused (23b-32)

When the other soldiers of Judah caught up to where Asahel’s body was lying, the stopped in their tracks. This horrifying scene of one of their champions lying dead seemed to leave them at a loss for what to do. But Joab and Abishai continued to pursue Abner until the sun began to set (24).

As Abner was fleeing, he was able to assemble a larger army of Benjamites around him, and they took a stand on top of a hill. (25) Once again, Abner spoke to try to put the brakes on the senseless battle. Let’s read verse 26. *“**Abner called out to Joab, ‘Must the sword devour forever? Don’t you realize that this will end in bitterness? How long before you order your men to stop pursuing their fellow Israelites?’”* There is wisdom in these words, coming from a weary old soldier who has seen so much of sorrow caused by war. He also reminds Joab that the Judahites and the Benjamites are the same people, all descendants of Israel.

This time, Abner’s words have the desired effect. Joab answered in verse 27, *“As surely as God lives, if you had not spoken, the men would have continued pursuing them until morning.”* Then he blows the horn to stop the troops from pursuing. But let’s look at Joab’s statement. Why does he say that if Abner had not spoken, they would not have stopped? Joab is implying that it was always Abner’s responsibility to stop this battle. I think that’s right. Abner is not innocent here. He was the one who put Ish-Bosheth on the throne, and he was the one who suggested the stabbing contest.

Now, both armies marched back home, Abner to Mahanaim and Joab to Hebron, with the men carrying Asahel’s body. Thus, the first battle of this civil war was ended with nothing resolved. Verses 30 and 31 tell us that the Benjamites suffered more losses in this battle than David’s men did. But as we’ll see, this war cannot end until Abner can really decide to do God’s will instead of his own will.

Today we saw the beginning of the tragic conflict of succession that happened after Saul’s death. It was God’s will to raise up David as king of all Israel, but because of people’s sinful nature it didn’t happen easily. It’s the same situation with Jesus’ kingdom coming to this world, which David’s kingdom is a symbol of. We know Jesus is God’s true king of righteousness and peace and that he will finally rule over everything. But for the present time, there is conflict, spiritual battle. We are Jesus’ spiritual soldiers who want to enthrone him in every heart with the gospel ministry, but it’s not easy. Some people misunderstand that battle as a merely human conflict, but we make it clear that we are not fighting against people, but against spiritual forces of darkness (Eph 6:12). Like David, we need to be patient and pray to see how to make the most of every opportunity in evil times. Most of all, let’s have faith that God’s righteous kingdom will finally come on earth.