

### 2<sup>ND</sup> SAMUEL

#### Week 5, chapters 3 and 4

A corner is about to be turned in the history of Israel. 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel chapter 3 records the story of the final stage of David's rise to power as the first king of a fully united Israel.

Last week we saw that Abner, the military commander and real power behind the throne of Ishbosheth, used a somewhat contrived crisis to make a move to depose **Ishbosheth** and turn the northern kingdom over to David. The crisis was that Abner went into Ishbosheth's harem (that he inherited from his father, Saul) and had sexual relations with **Rizpah**, perhaps the most prominent woman in the harem. In this era such a thing was done to show total disrespect for the current leadership and to indicate that a new leader had arisen to usurp the old. In other words there is no doubt that Abner created an excuse to have a confrontation with Ishbosheth (by means of cavorting with **Rizpah**) so that he could do just what he did: transfer Saul's old kingdom from **Ishbosheth** to David.

There were several motivations for Abner to do such a thing even though the one he spoke about actually seemed to be righteous in nature. Abner says that the reason he is going to hand the kingdom over to David is because God had made it publically known that David was to be the king over all Israel, and therefore Abner was merely acting in obedience to the divine decree. But behind this supposed pious purpose were a personal agenda and some political realities. For one, we read in verse 17 that many of the elders of the northern tribes had groused for some time that they preferred David over **Ishbosheth**. **Ishbosheth** was a weak king, somewhat of an embarrassment, and the people liked what they saw in David. Thus as we discussed last week in tribal societies the ongoing game was to position yourself (your clan or your tribe) to be in the good graces of the current leader, while remaining on the lookout for a new and stronger leader to ally yourself with for your tribe's benefit.

It had become obvious by now that David was that new stronger leader and the northern tribes merely needed a proper shove to move their loyalties to him. **Avner** was in a similar position. He was the leader of the military of the north and knew that soon David would overcome them

and become king of all Israel. It was customary that the top military commander was 2<sup>nd</sup> in command to the king; but David already had a military commander in good standing in **Yo'av** (David's nephew) so if the kingdom fell to David then Abner was out of a job. On the other hand if it was Abner who approached David with a gracious offer to bloodlessly deliver the scepter of power to him, perhaps Abner could negotiate a position as 2<sup>nd</sup> in power in David's administration and thus outmaneuver Joab.

So Abner met with the northern tribal leaders and told them that he wanted them to agree to make David their king; next he went to the leaders of Benjamin who weren't nearly as anxious for the change because it would mean that the throne that had been held by a Benjamite would be turned over to someone from the tribe of Judah. All realized that whether they fully agree or not if Abner was for it, who could be against it? Thus Abner paid David a state visit with a distinguished entourage of 20 tribal elders, a proper feast was held to commemorate the event and show respect, and it was agreed that these northern tribes would give their loyalty to David.

All that was left was for a general assembly of all the northern coalition leaders to convene to formally confirm David; so David bid his new ally Abner farewell and guaranteed his safe journey back to his home territory.

Let's begin from there at 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel chapter 3 verse 22.

### RE-READ 2<sup>ND</sup> SAMUEL 3: 22 – end

It's no coincidence that Abner came to David while **Yo'av** was away leading a raiding party. No doubt when Abner sent messengers asking for a meeting the cunning David knew that with **Yo'av** present there would be no chance for a treaty and Abner likely would not survive the meeting. Recall that Joab was now in a blood feud with Abner because he had killed **Yo'av's** brother **Asahel**. So David arranged for **Yo'av** to be gone; but when **Yo'av** returned and heard about Abner's visit he became furious and confronted King David.

Verse 22 makes a point that Joab returned with **rav shalal**, meaning a huge abundance, a

great amount of captured plunder. So **Yo'av** was feeling quite proud of himself, no doubt brimming with confidence, and then he finds out that behind his back this meeting with his mortal enemy took place. One must look at the tone of **Yo'av's** words and notice somewhat of a parallel with the way Abner spoke to **Ishbosheth**. Just as Abner was so incensed (although, again, I think he was embellishing a bit so as to enhance this crisis) and he felt free to openly speak his mind to the king, so we see Joab being surprisingly strong and freely expressing his indignation with his words to King David.

On the surface it seems as though Joab is sincerely concerned that Abner came merely to discover David's military plans and David played the dupe to Abner's cleverness. But in fact although the English hides it, there is a sarcastic and offensive sexual undertone in Joab's remarks. Although women may not always be aware of it, men often insult one another by saying that they are behaving as females or are serving as a female in a sex act. As unsavory as this is it is hardly a modern phenomenon; it likely goes back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of humans. Verses 24 and 25 have **Yo'av** complaining to David that "Abner came to you", and that "he came only to deceive you". Actually what it says more literally is that Abner "went into you" because "he came only to seduce you". The words used are nearly identical, and are meant to be taken in the same sense, as when **Ishbosheth** accused Abner of seducing and going into **Rizpah**, Saul's concubine. I don't think I need to draw this picture with any more detail.

The point is that **Yo'av** was amazingly brazen in his insult of King David and David is amazingly silent as there is no record of David responding as one might think he would to such blatant insubordination (family or not). But one must also understand what was going through Joab's mind and the stakes that were involved; he, too, understood that if the two kingdoms (the north and the south) combined under one king there would not be room for two top military commanders. There cannot be TWO seconds-in-command to the king. So he instantly suspected (rightly so) that Abner was there to negotiate his way into **Yo'av's** position and since David had deceived **Yo'av** by sending him away for Abner to come, he naturally thought that his worst suspicions had come about.

This firm conviction had much to do with what comes next. **Yo'av** was not going to go down without a fight; he wasn't David's top military commander because he could be easily run over by a competitor. Joab sends some messengers after Abner, apparently lying to him and telling him that David needed him to come back. Abner had traveled only a few miles up the road leading north from the meeting at Hebron when the messengers caught up to him at a place called the cistern at Sirah. When Abner arrived back at Hebron, expecting that all was well, **Yo'av** greeted him and drew him aside to a place between the inner and outer gates of the city; a place where they could have a moment of privacy. Not suspecting anything the great warrior Abner was at ease; **Yo'av** struck. Joab killed two birds with one stone (pardon the pun).

By slaying Abner he not only did away with a rival for his job as David's #2 man but also he did his duty (in his eyes) as the family *go'el hadam* (the blood avenger). Joab avenged his brother *Asahel's* death at Abner's hands.

There is some symbolism here about Joab killing Abner at the city gate. First is that by stabbing Abner near the fifth rib, he pierced Abner in the same place as Abner pierced Asahel. Second, the city gate was the customary place in the Middle East where court was convened and decisions handed down by the elders. So the idea is that the city gate is the place where justice is meted out. To Joab he was bringing Abner to justice at the place of justice; but was justice actually being served? I say no; this was not justice it was pure revenge and it was wrong.

This is one of those many cases I suggested you watch for as we proceed because the Torah Law was being twisted and turned and degraded and molded to fit comfortable and long held Middle Eastern customs of all kinds. Just as do Christians today, Israelites had little trouble rationalizing their actions that were so normal for ancient societies of every kind by painting a face of piety on nothing more than a worldly pagan behavior and attitude by adding some Hebrew religion to it. Somehow by assigning a Biblical name or misapplying a Scripture passage that was taken out of context, a wrongful behavior was made not only right but good and even pleasing to Yehoveh.

The Torah Law is very clear that death in battle is justifiable killing and it is certainly not murder. There is no criminality to it; there is no atonement necessary for it, and it was not what the laws concerning the blood avenger and sanctuary cities were established to deal with. Sanctuary cities were meant to deal with what we today might call manslaughter; matters of accidental or unintended or perhaps negligent homicide.

Just as sanctuary cities were NOT for the purpose of protecting murderers who lay in wait for their victims, neither were they for protecting warriors who had killed an enemy in the heat of battle. And this was because warriors who killed in battle did nothing wrong and needed no protection. Thus when in battle Asahel chased down Abner with the intention to kill him, and Abner pled with Asahel to turn away because Asahel was certain to die, he wouldn't listen. Thus in battle (even in self-defense, really) Abner killed Asahel. That *Yo'av*, Asahel's anguished brother, deemed this an unlawful death worthy of legally sanctioned revenge; and that Abner was now (to Joab's way of thinking) the equivalent of a person who needed to escape to a sanctuary city, is completely wrong minded and a perversion of the Law.

It isn't that hard to see this (if we know the Torah) when reading these stories. What is harder

is to see, though, is how we do such similar things in our own everyday lives. We at times twist and turn the Bible to allow us to have our way and to not appear all that different from our neighbors. We discuss among ourselves, as Christian brothers and sisters, about how our eyes are the portals into our minds that need to be guarded against unclean things, and then we go see the same Hollywood filth at the movies that our pagan neighbors do. We say that we are firm believers of a literal Bible and then claim that we can abolish God's appointed times or declare **Shabbat** as any day of the week that we personally choose (for our personal convenience) as long we celebrate it generally every 7 days. What do you suppose Christ would say about any of our personal customized Sabbath day and holiday choices that generally dispose of the ones His Father ordained? How about our modern infatuation with accumulating personal wealth that fits nicely with an all too commonly taught doctrine that God wants and intends for us all to be rich in material possessions; and we will be if we just believe that with enough conviction?

We certainly don't see ourselves as unfaithful worshippers remaking God's laws in our image anymore than did Joab. Cultural customs and cherished symbols are powerful things, as are doctrines and traditions and peer pressure. But as the Lord's followers we are to resist these manmade things when they do not agree with God's Word; not make excuses and embrace them. Easier said than done.

Being a leader in any age is a tough deal. One must balance what must be done with what can be done. David had shown the utmost restraint in dealing with Saul, and now since Saul's death in dealing with Ishbosheth, allowing events to occur naturally under the divinely ordered course. Some of this was due to his devotedness to the Lord, some because of his own character and principles, and some because there were political realities that had to be considered. So when David learned of Abner's death at Yo'av's treacherous hand, all sorts of thoughts flooded into his mind of just what this could mean for him. And of course his first thought was that the northern tribes would view Abner's death as David's doing; it was the beginning of "cleaning house" of any potential threats or competitors in preparation to assume the throne of all Israel.

So immediately he declares his innocence of Abner's death and that whatever consequences, divine or fleshly, that was due for this act should fall upon **Yo'av** and all of his father's family. David then proceeds to issue a kind of curse (a standard Middle Eastern way of speaking) upon Yo'av's family that includes that someone in it should always be suffering from a discharge (**zuv**), or from leprosy (**tzara'at**), or would need to walk with a cane, or who is killed in battle, or who doesn't have enough lechem (bread, food). Let me remind you that the first two sufferings (**zuv and tzara'at**) are seen as spiritually, not naturally, caused afflictions. And that **tzara'at** is NOT leprosy; it is indicative of a whole range of nasty and debilitating skin diseases and severe rashes. Like any public politician David was quickly distancing himself

from the actions of someone in his administration that could be damaging to him. Now did David benefit from this in some way? Perhaps; it certainly further weakened the northern kingdom to lose its legendary military commander. But it could only cause more difficulty for David than create advantage. How could the northern tribe NOT be suspicious of Abner's death at Hebron, David's headquarters, despite David's protest that he had nothing to do with it?

Verse 30 says in the CJB, ***“Thus Yo'av and Avishai his brother killed Abner, because he had killed their brother Asahel during the battle in Gibeon”***. This was not put here so as to repeat the facts for future readers. Unfortunately most English translations miss the point of this passage, which is that a contrast is being presented to clearly differentiate between the nature of these 2 killings (that of Asahel versus that of Abner). The word describing Abner's death is ***harag***, and it carries the sense of murder or destruction (unjustifiable homicide). The word used to describe Asahel's death is ***muth***, and it leans towards meaning to die or to be executed (justifiable homicide). In fact the narrator makes it clear that Asahel's death occurred in battle, while ***Yo'av*** and ***Avishai*** merely slew Abner (in a non-combat situation).

Essentially from here to the end of the chapter is David doing damage control; he's making quite a show of sorrow and repugnance in order to distance himself from the dirty deed. No doubt he was being as sincere as he was being pragmatic. He was doing all the things that Middle Eastern and Hebrew culture would instantly understand that only a sincere man would do. He mourned and ordered that others mourn. He spoke a proper and respectful eulogy over Abner. He threw an elegant and all-encompassing curse over Abner's killers (even though they were his own sister's sons), and he even walked behind Abner's body in a funeral procession (the highest honor that a king could confer upon the deceased and reserved usually for a member of the royal family).

But as we'll find out later (for instance in chapter 16 of 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel), not everyone in Israel believed David's story or his innocence in this matter. In chapter 16 we'll read of the story of a man named ***Shimei*** (a distant relative of Saul who must have been a Benjamite) and how he curses King David and throws rocks at the king and his men and openly blames him for the deaths of Saul and Ishbosheth.

For the most part, however, verses 35 and 36 make it clear that the people did believe David and they were satisfied that he had gone out of his way to show the greatest respect to this great warrior who had been a worthy adversary for many years. Even so, David was in a political bind. The last couple of verses show that despite being King of Judah he had by no means consolidated his power. He knew he needed to punish Joab for committing murder

(from the viewpoints of God's Torah justice and to show the north that he was a just and fair man). But these violent sons of Zeruiah, and apparently the family's position in society, didn't allow for it at this time. So David said to his servants (meaning those in the king's court) that even though he is the anointed king that he feels weak. That is he's just not in a position to force his will on this matter at this time. Thus David asks Yehoveh to take justice upon these criminals.

Let's move on to chapter 4.

### READ 2<sup>ND</sup> SAMUEL CHAPTER 4 all

The scene now moves to Mahanaim, north of David in the Trans-Jordan, where Ishbosheth rules from. We should understand that what we just read is occurring at the same time of the final events of chapter 3. That is, while the funeral is going on and then afterwards David is lamenting his predicament, Ishbosheth and the people of the north have received word of the Abner's murder and are reacting in shock to it. News traveled very fast in those days; it's unimaginable that any more than a day passed before the story of Abner's demise reached the citizens north of Judah.

Verse 1 explains that all Israel became alarmed; this is referring to the northern tribal coalition. The people of the north feared that Abner's death was merely the opening volley of David taking revenge for all those years that they fought against David. Ishbosheth also must have had mixed feelings; because the man who was in process of taking his kingdom from him was now dead. However this same man controlled the military and had been the de facto power of the north that held the coalition together. Obviously Ishbosheth had neither the regal bearing to rule, nor the diplomatic skills to maneuver through the minefield of clans and tribes and foreign nations (something at which Abner was most adept). Ishbosheth knew that when it was all added up, he was in worse shape without Abner than with him. With Abner he would probably remain alive and be decently treated. Without Abner.....

So now that we know that the scene has shifted to the northern headquarters, a new element is added. Two scoundrels named **Ba'anah** and **Rekhav** are introduced to us. Their father is **Rimmon** who said to come from **Be'eroth**. And then to help explain their relationship with Ishbosheth some tribal and family history is given.

Be'eroth was one of several named villages and towns that fell to the tribe of Benjamin. In Joshua 18:21 -28 is the listing of cities and towns reckoned to Benjamin by Joshua.

<sup>21</sup> *The cities of the tribe of the descendants of Binyamin according to their families were: Yericho, Beit-Hoglah, 'Emek-K'tzitz,*

<sup>22</sup> *Beit-'Aravah, Tz'marayim, Beit-El,*

<sup>23</sup> *'Avim, Parah, 'Ofrah,*

<sup>24</sup> *K'far-Ha'amonah, 'Ofni and Geva- twelve cities, together with their villages.*

<sup>25</sup> *Giv'on, Ramah, Be'erot,*

And the list continues but notice that the last name I mentioned was **Be'eroth**. It seems that some number of this city's population fled to **Gittaim**, near **Beth-Horon**, just a few miles northwest from **Be'eroth**, so likely this was a village that had now become almost abandoned (a ghost town). Rashi says that the flight of this mixed race city occurred at the time of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 31 when the Philistines attacked the northern tribes and killed Saul. I say mixed race because this was a village of gentiles (of course) at the time Joshua and Israel arrived, but it was taken over and controlled by the tribe of Benjamin. Apparently this village, as did so many, assimilated into Israelite tribe that occupied their land. Recall that we are at a time in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel that is at least 3 centuries since Joshua crossed over the Jordan so there had been a whole lot of mixing going on between the gentiles of Canaan and the 12 tribes of Israel. So by now the people of **Be'eroth** were considered as members of the tribe of Benjamin, even though many of them whose real heritage were as Canaanites kept a memory of that fact by how they called themselves. That is the case we see here.

Likely, 2500 years ago and more, the situation about **Be'eroth** was understood by the Israelites living in the Land and so this detail was an important one. What happens regarding these guys makes their heritage and tribal affiliation important.

Verse 4 adds more information that is important to help us understand the sense of tragedy that was on the horizon. David's dearest friend Jonathan had a son named **Mephibosheth**. When the nurse who was in charge of **Mephibosheth's** care got the horrifying news that Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle and that the Philistines were overrunning the land, she snatched up the 5 year old child and in a panic began to run; but she dropped him and he became permanently crippled as a result. Almost certainly a spinal injury had been the result of



the accident.

**Mephibosheth** was Saul's grandson, but his mother was **Rizpah** (yes, the **Rizpah** of Saul and Ishbosheth's harm that Abner slept with). There is some disagreement on **Rizpah** as his mother but most of the ancient Rabbis say he was, there is Biblical evidence of it, and it helps makes sense out of why **Rizpah** was prominent in this overall story and some later ones.

Notice how similar is the names **Mephi-bosheth** and **Ish-bosheth**. We discussed how later Hebrew editors tended to replace the word "ba'al" with the word "bosheth" as they found using the term "ba'al" too offensive. I'm not going to explain all the nuances of ba'al and bosheth today (you can go back to the previous lesson to review that). But it is thought that Mephibosheth means something like, "exterminate ba'al", or "cut down the idol of ba'al". In any case, as a son of Jonathan, there is no doubt that it is meant to denote a good and righteous name. Later on yet another variation of this name will be found in 1Chronicles 8 and 9: **Meriv-ba'al**.

Here's the thing: the reason for the insertion of this information about Mephibosheth is to help explain the sadness of Ishbosheth's coming death. There is no heir to the Saul's throne once Ishbosheth is dead. Mephibosheth is more or less the last person who has a close enough tie to Saul to at least qualify to be part of the royal dynasty. But there is no way that a man lame from childhood can be made king, so the end of Saul's house is almost here. Ishbosheth's coming demise signals the death blow to the entire house of Saul. And in tribal society this is a great tragedy.

So now that we have the needed background on the players in this story, verse 7 explains that the two sons of Rimmon went to the house where **Ishbosheth** lived when he was taking an afternoon siesta. They appeared to be coming to get some wheat and were likely familiar to most of the servants and guards (as we were told earlier that they were the captains of some of Ishbosheth's raiding parties). As **Ishbosheth** lay sleeping they assassinated him. Then they beheaded him and brought Ishbosheth's head to King David.

Their motive for doing this is explained in verse 8: knowing that Abner was dead and that Ishbosheth had no hope of ruling these two men wanted to attract David's favor by eliminating his rival for the throne. Thus by this means they felt they were demonstrating their loyalty to the new king and so expected a high reward consisting of high positions in David's administration.

But even if they were right in their claim that Saul had deserved to die because of his irrational pursuit of David, what had Ishbosheth done to deserve such treatment? A wise man a long time ago told me something to always keep in mind: people tend to automatically assume that others have the same mindset and character flaws that they have. They assumed that since they would have been thrilled if someone had done for them what they had done for David, that David would applaud this treacherous and vile act.

But far from rewarding them David gave them their just rewards as murderers; he had them immediately executed. The Amalekite who killed Saul at least did so at Saul's behest; but it was still murder of God's anointed. No court was necessary for **Ba'anah and Rekhav**; they confessed it all boastfully. They murdered a king as he slept; a fellow member of the tribe of Benjamin they killed for crass gain. The Law requires the life of murderers and so what David did here was completely lawful.

Yet we end this chapter with another reminder of how the Torah Law had become corrupted by intermingling with its manmade Middle Eastern tradition and custom. It was right for David to execute two murderers but mutilation even of a corpse is not. That he cut off their hands and feet is not permitted by the Law; but it was customary in that era and meant to be symbolic. They used their feet to run to commit murder and their hands to do the dastardly deed.

We'll start chapter 5 next time.